

STAR TREK[®]
ROLEPLAYING GAME

NARRATOR'S TOOLKIT

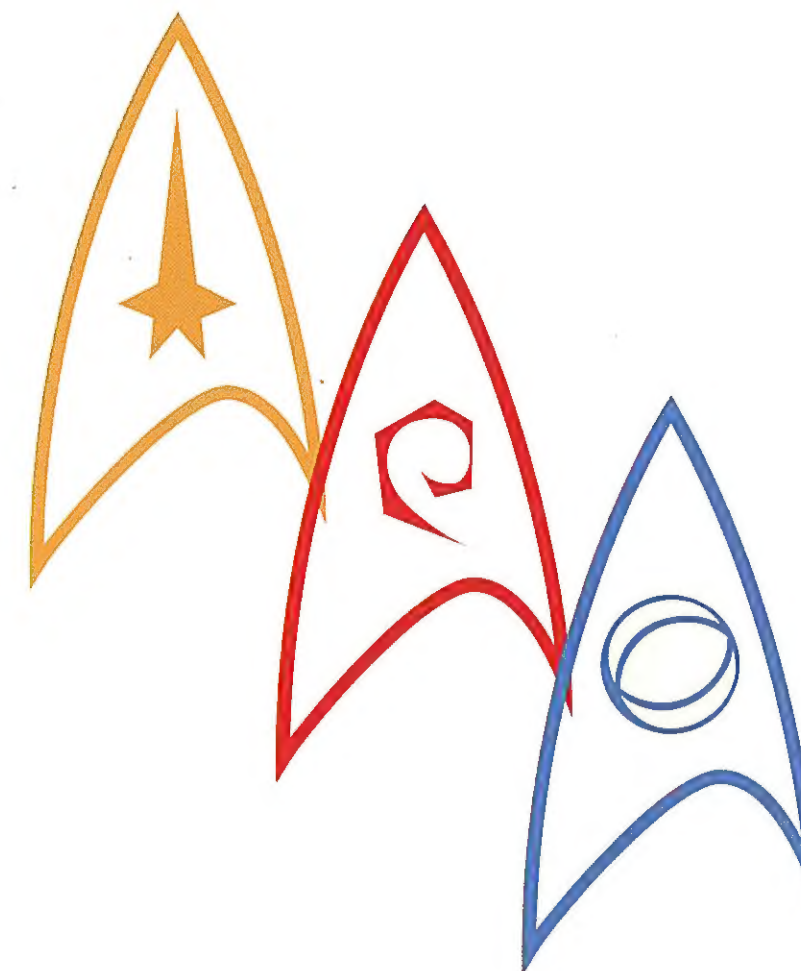


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DIFFICULTY TABLE	
Difficulty Number	Description
0	no roll required.
3, 4, 5	Routine
6, 7, 8	Moderate
9, 10, 11	Challenging
12, 13, 14	Difficult
15+	Nearly Impossible

OPPOSED TEST MODIFIERS	
Situation	Modifier
Small Advantage	+1 to Test Result
Moderate Advantage	+2 to TR
Significant Advantage	+3 to TR
Dominating Advantage	+4 to TR
Small Disadvantage	-1 to TR
Moderate Disadvantage	-2 to TR
Significant Disadvantage	-3 to TR
Dominating Disadvantage	-4 to TR

MOVEMENT		
Type	Rate	Difficulty
Crawl	5m per action	No roll required
Walk	10m per action	No roll required
Run	15m per action	Routine (5)
Sprint	20m per action	Moderate (7)
Swim	3m per action	Routine (4)
Jump	2m forward, 1m up	Moderate (6)
Climb	2m per action	Moderate (7)
Terrain Modifiers		
Terrain Type	Modifier	
Swampy	+3	
Mountainous/Steep	+2	
Wet/Slick/Icy	+2	
Water (2' or higher)	+2	
Obstacles, many/large	+2	
Obstacles, few/small	+1	
Sandy	+1	
Rocky	+1	
Extremely flat or even	-1	
Paved	-2	

TEST MODIFIERS	
Situation	Modifier
Lack of proper tools or equipment	+1 Difficulty (or more)
Using particularly good or high-quality equipment	-1 Difficulty (or more)
Using off hand	+1 Difficulty
Visual Interference	
Light smoke, dim light	+1 Difficulty
Heavy smoke, moonlight	+2 Difficulty
Very thick smoke, total darkness	+3 Difficulty
Zero Gravity	+1 Difficulty

MOVEMENT MANEUVERS		
Action	Difficulty	Effect
Dodge	—	Dodge roll becomes the Difficulty Number to hit dodging character
Drop to prone	—	A form of Dodge
Get to feet	3	
Move 2m+	Varies	See Movement Table for Difficulties
Dive for cover	7	A form of Dodge which allows the character to move up to 5m at no penalty; every meter beyond 5 subtracts 1 from the character's dodge roll.
Drop and roll	4	A form of Dodge which allows the character to move up to 1m at no penalty; every meter beyond 1 subtracts 1 from the character's Dodge roll.
Tackle	9	The character moves up to 5m and tackles his opponent; success knocks opponent, does 2d6 Stun damage, Grabs (see <i>Combat Maneuvers</i> chart). Tackle requires a Coordination Test or Unarmed Combat Test.

STARSHIP MANEUVERS	
Maneuver	Difficulty
Turn to port/starboard	Routine (4)
Climb/dive	Routine (5)
Climb/dive and turn	Moderate (6)
Hard to port/starboard	Moderate (7)
Steep climb/dive	Moderate (7)
Steep climb/dive and turn	Moderate (8)
Steep climb/dive and hard turn	Challenging (9)

COMBAT MANEUVERS			
Universal Combat Maneuvers (Timed Actions) (usable by any character)			
Action	Difficulty	Damage	Notes
Aim	—	—	-1 Difficulty to hit target for each action used to Aim; characters may Aim multiple times.
Block	—	—	Character rolls appropriate Skill Test (Unarmed Combat) or Coordination Test, subtracts 3 to establish Difficulty for hitting him with unarmed hand-to-hand attacks.
Grab	9	—	Character grabs opponent to immobilize him, preventing him from taking action. Make Opposed Test using Fitness (modified by Strength, Immediate Action once per turn) each round.
Kick	8	4+1d6	
Punch	7	3+1d6	
Roundhouse Punch	8	4+1d6	
Snap Punch/Kick	6	2+1d6	
Boxing (Timed Actions) (usable by characters who know Unarmed Combat: Boxing)			
Action	Difficulty	Damage	Notes
Block	—	—	Parries unarmed hand-to-hand attacks. The character rolls a Boxing Test to establish a Difficulty for hitting him with such attacks.
Cross/Jab	7	4+1d6	
Hook/Uppercut	8	5+1d6	
Brawling (Timed Actions) (usable by characters who know Unarmed Combat: Brawling)			
Action	Difficulty	Damage	Notes
Flying Smash	8	5+1d6	Brawler jumps into opponent, hitting him feet-first to knock him down. Attacker also falls to the ground unless he succeeds with a Moderate (7) Acrobatics (Gymnastics) Test.
Hammer	8	4+1d6	Brawler laces his fingers together to form one large "fist" and uses it to smash or strike his opponent. Miraculously, the brawler's fingers remain unharmed.
Hatchet Chop	8	Special	Brawler strikes opponent in the neck area with the edge of his flattened palm, doing 2+1d6 Stun Damage. If attempted from front of target, Difficulty increases to 9.
Punch	6	2+1d6	
Tackle	8	Special	Same as the Tackle (see Movement Maneuvers Table).

DEGREE OF INJURY TABLE	
Degree of Injury	Difficulty to Diagnose/Heal
Stunned	Routine (4)
Injured	Moderate (7)
Wounded	Challenging (8)
Incapacitated	Difficult (13)
Near Death	Nearly Impossible (15)

PHASER, LASER, AND DISRUPTOR DAMAGE			
Phaser Damage			
Setting	Damage	CHG	Notes
1 Light Stun	(2+2d6)	1	Stun a Human for 5 minutes
2 Heavy Stun	(4+4d6)	2	Stun a Human for 1 hour and a Klingon for 15 minutes
3 Thermal	10+2d6	4	Cut a 1 m hole in 10 cm of steel in 3 minutes
4 Disrupt	12+3d6	6	Cut a 1 m hole in 10 cm of steel or rock in 30 seconds
5 Disintegrate A	16+4d6	10	Vaporize a humanoid-sized target
6 Disintegrate B	24+5d6	15	Vaporize metals, disrupt resistant materials, blow 5 cubic meters of rock into rubble
7 Disintegrate C	30+9d6	20	Vaporize any substance (energy rebound common), blow 10m ³ of rock into rubble
Laser Damage			
1 Low Thermal	10+2d6	1	Cut a 1 m hole in 10 cm of steel in 3 minutes
2 High Thermal	12+3d6	3	Cut a 1 m hole in 10 cm of steel or rock in 30 seconds
3 Disrupt	14+4d6	5	Kill a humanoid, shatter small rocks, cut a 1m hole in a starship bulkhead in 10 minutes
Disruptor Damage			
1 Heavy Stun	(4+2d6)	1	Stun a Human for 15 minutes and a Klingon for 5 minutes
2 Thermal	10+2d6	3	Cut a 1 m hole in 10 cm of steel in 3 minutes
3 Disrupt	24+5d6	10	Vaporize almost anything including humanoids and resilient alloys

ARCHAIC MISSILE WEAPONS			
Weapon	Range	Damage	Shots
Flintlock Rifle	10/20/50/100	10+3d6	1
Kligat	5/20/50/100	7+2d6	—
Machinegun	5/10/25/50	8+2d6	32
MELEE WEAPONS			
Weapon	Accuracy	Block	Damage
Knife	7	+1	3+2d6
Lirpa	9	+3	Blade 3+2d6, Club 2+2d6
Rapier	6	+2	4+d6
Stunrod	—	+2	2+Stun effects equal to phaser settings 1–2

RANGED COMBAT DIFFICULTY	
Range	Difficulty
Point Blank	Routine (3)
Short Range	Routine (4)
Medium Range	Moderate (7)
Long Range	Challenging (10)

COVER	
Cover	Armor
Thin wooden door	6
Wooden door	8
Thin, unarmored metal door	10
Reinforced metal door; large rocks	14
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Water (2' or higher)	+2
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Obstacles, few/small	+1
Sandy	+1
Rocky	+1
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PHASER, LASER, AND DISRUPTOR DAMAGE

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3 Disrupt	14+4d6	5	Kill a humanoid, shatter small rocks, cut a 1 m hole in a starship bulkhead in 10 minutes

Disruptor Damage

1 Heavy Stun	(4+2d6)	1	Stun a Human for 15 minutes and a Klingon for 5 minutes
2 Thermal	10+2d6	3	Cut a 1 m hole in 10 cm of steel in 3 minutes
3 Disrupt	24+5d6	10	Vaporize almost anything including humanoids and resilient alloys



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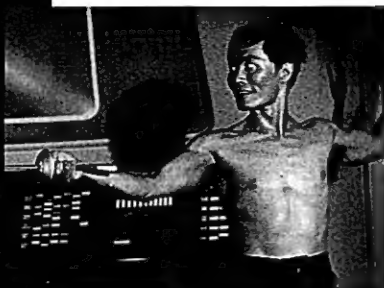
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Author's Dedication To Sandra, my wife, for making everything so much better than I thought it could be. To the pitfalls of toying with the forces of darkness, for bringing this book together. And to you, the Narrator, for bringing your friends with you to the stars. This is what it's all about.

Disclaimer While Last Unicorn Games has researched extensively to make this the most authentic *Star Trek®* Roleplaying Game possible, the depth of information necessary for a fully-realized roleplaying game is not always revealed during a weekly television show. While we have tried to extrapolate logically within the flavor of *Star Trek®*, we have taken some liberties and players should remember that only the events, characters, and places that appear on the show or in films are canon.

STAR TREK®
ROLEPLAYING GAME



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As the title implies, this is more than just a collection of Essays in what makes a good Narrator. It's a *Toolkit*: While you'll find plenty of theory and principle and such in these pages, you'll also find a considerable amount of practical *method*—tools to help any Narrator's job go a little easier.

The *Narrator's Toolkit* has been designed with every level of expertise in mind. This means that some of it will strike veteran Narrators as elementary, and some of it will strike novice Narrators as complex and daunting. Every

Narrator's Toolkit

effort has been taken to, at the very least, make every section entertaining and worthwhile. The veterans can nod and smile at the easy stuff, and the novices can prepare to have their eyes opened to ideas that might revolutionize the way they play.

It is the sincere hope of the author that every Narrator will find something of use here, that your episodes will be just a little better for having taken the time to visit our "Starfleet Academy for Narrators," that you'll find a nugget or two of wisdom that you can take with you, to help your friends at the gaming table have a better time.

The Most Important Thing: A Quick Note For Newcomers

This book covers a lot of ground, from how to give sparkle to your NPCs to half-a-dozen different ways to approach plotting your episodes. If you're a "veteran" Narrator, then I'm confident you'll find a few interesting ideas to add to your repertoire of tricks and techniques. If you're new to the hobby, though, I understand that the many facets of good game mastering can really seem overwhelming at first! The Narrator of a *Star Trek RPG* game has to be a writer, an actor, a director, a producer . . . there's paperwork and planning and what seems like a million variables, and the whole time, you've got a tableful of players waiting to be entertained. It can feel like a lot of pressure!

Don't let it get to you! This is a *fun* way to spend your time, and when it all works out, the satisfaction you'll get from helping your friends experience the *Star Trek* universe firsthand will be an amazing payoff for your efforts.

As with any creative endeavor, the key to success is to *eliminate self-doubt and develop your sense of confidence*. A self-confident attitude is what makes the difference between a struggling, frustrated Narrator and one who's enjoying himself. If you're a *Star Trek* fan, then you know you already have the imagination needed. All you need to do is grab a pencil and paper and enjoy the process of tapping into it.

What's the best way to eliminate your doubts and boost your confidence? It's simply this: Play to your strengths, and work to expand them at your own pace. Understand that every Narrator is different; we all have our

own areas of special skill. The key is to figure out what your strengths *are* and to exploit your own talent shamelessly. Some Narrators are known for really great descriptions—they can make a simple room come alive. Some are known for entertaining NPCs—you really feel like you're talking to somebody *different* when you're doing a dialogue scene. Some can do really exciting, fast-paced combat; others are especially good at mystery plots. There's no Narrator in the whole world who's the best at *everything*, and there's no "wrong" way to be a Narrator, as long as your players are enjoying the game. A few good habits to keep in mind:

SEEK THE ADVICE OF YOUR PLAYERS

Between game sessions, don't hesitate to ask what you're doing right and what you could be doing better. Of course, most players will let you know, both in play and out, without being asked, but sometimes asking them directly results in surprising responses. Respect their opinions, and avoid any temptation to get defensive or rationalize. Take critiques with maturity, and take praise any way you can get it!

PAY ATTENTION IN PLAY

In mid-game, make a mental note (or even a physical one) when a scene goes particularly well, or particularly poorly. Later on, look back over that scene and see what you can learn.

LEARN FROM OTHERS

If at all possible, every Narrator should also be a player in another Narrator's game from time to time. Even if there isn't enough gaming happening in your area to enjoy the luxury of multiple campaigns (or if your life is too busy for it), you should still seek out the occasional one-shot episode. Game shops and gaming conventions are good places to look. By comparing your "regular" gaming style to others', you can not only isolate your own strengths, but get good ideas that will keep you from falling into a routine!



Knowing what you're really good at is the foundation of confidence, and the key to improving your Narration skills, too.

Storytelling Fundamentals: Making a Scene

In the *Star Trek Roleplaying Game*, we examined the basic “three-act structure” for plotting an episode for your game. By using the acts to give logical order to your episode, you can ensure that the tension rises, the action builds, and the whole thing makes sense. But broad-strokes concepts like the Act are only the first stage of defining a good episode. Here, we'll take the time to examine an even more fundamental “unit:” the scene.

Paying deliberate attention to your scenes will keep your games going from going flabby; overextended or “weak” scenes are the number-one cause of “game lag,” where the pacing falters and everybody sits around the table, looking at each other in hopes that things will get moving again. As the Narrator, you have the power (and the pleasure) to prevent this by carefully examining your scenes.

The simplest scenes have a single purpose, a single location, and a single set of participants. Once the purpose is fulfilled, the scene is concluded, and another, different scene can begin. The purpose for a scene can be any of the following:

- *Revelation*
- *Introducing Conflict*
- *Developing Conflict*
- *Resolving Conflict*
- *Establishing a Question*
- *Resolving a Question*
- *Establishing or Manipulating Atmosphere*
- *Establishing Character*
- *Misdirection and Redirection*

These are “classic” concepts in fiction and drama, but they take on different definitions when applied to a role-

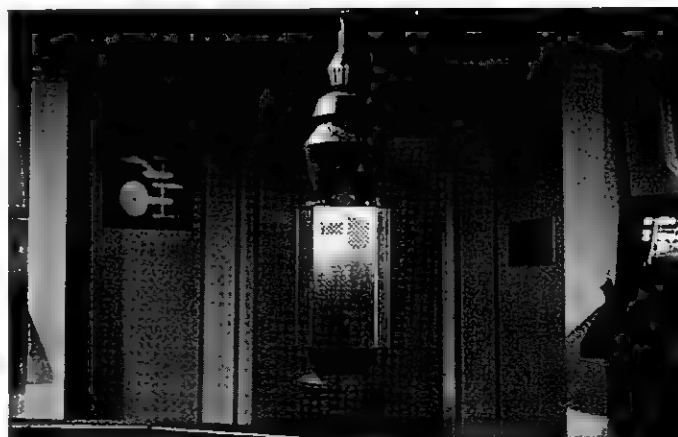
playing game, since fiction is all about playing with the expectations of the reader or viewer. In a roleplaying game, you're dealing, almost directly, with the protagonists themselves, which means a Narrator must understand scenes in a way that no novelist ever needs to! To that end, we'll examine each potential function of a scene in the next few sections.

REVELATION

The scene is designed to reveal something important—that the Centauran merchant is the villain, that the madness spreading through the ship is a virus, that tribbles and Klingons hate one another. Sometimes, revelations are dramatic turning points that provide the path to the climax. Other revelation scenes are simple scenes of exposition, providing information needed to set the stage for later action.

INTRODUCING CONFLICT

The scene is where an important conflict begins. Note that some simple conflicts (a guard that must be overcome, a room filling with neural gas, a heavily wagered game of 3-D chess) are established and resolved in the same scene. But the conflicts that really make a story interesting are begun in one scene, continue through a large chunk of the episode, and are resolved later. The conflict-introduction scene establishes (or clarifies) the motives of all involved parties, and usually addresses what is at stake—what happens if Party A wins and Party B loses.



DEVELOPING CONFLICT

Conflicts that run through large parts of an episode will frequently have one or more scenes in which they evolve, change completely, or grow in complexity. For instance, suppose that the Crew is chasing down some rogue Federation officers who are wreaking havoc on a primitive world. A previous scene established the chase when the Captain spoke to the leader of the rogues, who made it plain that they refuse to be contacted. A developing scene might establish that there are ten times as many errant officers loose on the planet than was previously known, and that the tiny group being pursued is little more than a decoy. The conflict has now matured—the stakes are higher, the risk is greater, and battle plans must be revised accordingly.

RESOLVING CONFLICT

The scene contains the final “battle” that resolves an established conflict. Sometimes it’s a battle of wits or circumstance, sometimes a much more direct battle of phaser or cudgel! In a conflict-resolution scene, the “winner” of the conflict gains something important—sometimes just the right to keep breathing, but often a piece of information, a valuable object, or access to an important area.

ESTABLISHING A QUESTION

In many ways, a “plot” is just a series of questions and answers, with more questions at the beginning, a few answers in the middle (plus more questions) and then the rest of the answers at the end. At least, that’s true in passive fiction like TV or film, where the entire point is to engage the interest of the reader by introducing questions, maintaining suspense, and then providing an unexpected resolution. In an episode of the *Star Trek Roleplaying Game*, establishing questions is vital for related reasons—to make a story a mystery, to motivate the Crew to seek out the answers. Question-establishing scenes are built a lot like conflict-establishing ones; the difference is that the “enemy” is the Crew’s own lack of answers. Such scenes

should establish not only the question, but provide (or amplify) reasons to get answers!

RESOLVING A QUESTION

Much like a conflict-resolution scene, except that the answer to a plot-related question is typically its own reward—and frequently not a reward at all, but the source of a new conflict or question! Questions rarely merit “developing” scenes in the way that conflicts do, except in deliberate mystery plots, where nearly every scene is about either questions or atmosphere. In such cases, “Developing a Question” scenes tend to be revelation scenes that work just like conflict-development scenes. They bring a new wrinkle to the question, often in the form of revised or heightened motives for answering it: “Dear God! Whoever sabotaged the transporter didn’t just steal the ambassador’s statue—he murdered five hundred people on Starbase Four!” [Cue theme music; fade to commercial].

ESTABLISHING OR MANIPULATING ATMOSPHERE

While such scenes should remain a minority, atmosphere-related scenes are vital ingredients in providing the unique *Star Trek* flavor to your games, and making each episode more immersive. Such scenes seldom provide vital clues or key conflicts. Rather, they heighten tension and involve the players’ collective feelings. Such a scene might be designed to establish a panicked sense of crisis, or a sober sense of ceremony and history, or inspire a sense of wonder. An atmosphere-manipulating scene is necessary



when a strong atmosphere has been established and needs changing—a scene of comic relief in a tense drama, for example, or an up-shift from fast-paced adventure to desperate horror. These scenes give meaning to the game’s action in the same way that revelations give motive.

ESTABLISHING CHARACTER

Close cousins to the atmosphere-related scenes, these focus on people rather than the story’s mood. Characters are best described through action, rather than description, so character-establishing scenes are typically scenes designed to “show off” an NPC’s behavior in some way. Some examples include: A scene of crisis that establishes that the new ensign panics easily, or an “exposition” scene designed more to establish that the prisoner the Crew is interrogating is manipulative and paranoid than to impart whatever information he might provide. Scenes can also be designed to allow the Crew to establish themselves. Such scenes usually present choices with no “right” or “wrong” answer—choices that will let the players reveal their characters’ quirks and attitudes through something besides dialogue.

MISDIRECTION AND REDIRECTION

This type of scene is probably the most dramatic example of the differences between roleplaying and traditional fiction. In a story, misdirection means deliberately misleading the reader to make the climax more surprising, or to maintain suspense. In the *Star Trek Roleplaying Game*, misdirection—and the much more common redirection—is all about deliberately slowing or speeding the progress of the Crew! This includes scenes that are designed mainly to introduce clues—a sneaky form of revelation, really, where you’re giving the players information without explicitly letting them know that’s what they’re getting. Apart from clue-planting, such scenes are rarely planned at all—they are improvised at need, when the Crew either (A) comes dangerously close to “short-circuiting” the episode by prematurely concluding it, or (B) threatens to drag the episode along by pursuing dead-end trails or performing



suicidal acts. The Narrator then inserts a scene meant to misdirect or redirect, to maintain the integrity of the pacing (if not always the plot).

PULLING IT ALL TOGETHER

With these purposes in mind, we can make scenes that work better for us. Lots of Narrators forget, for example, to include conflict-development scenes to heighten tension, or include scenes with no clearly-defined goal at all, which can be the death of good pacing. When designing your episodes, it’s usually best to include a good mix of scene-types. Keep the list above in mind as a kind of “checklist,” but don’t feel that you have to include every type of scene in every episode; some plots will require more of one type or none of another.

Of course, the descriptions above aren’t meant to provide hard-and-fast boundaries. They’re ideal categories; designed to make it easier for you to organize your thoughts and “check” your episode for variety and purpose. In reality, many scenes will combine purposes, or have multiple purposes. The key is to remember to have some kind of goal clearly in mind for a scene, and to work the scene to build to its conclusion without lagging.

The Very Best Scenes

What makes some scenes work, and others fail? What makes some scenes *great*, while others simply “work?” Even when you have a scene’s purpose in mind, a scene can still be dull, or feel “wrong,” or fail to advance the plot.



Some things to keep in mind when writing and running your scenes:

Be careful not to jump track too abruptly in terms of style and tone. Mixing up dialogue and combat and “puzzle” scenes is a great idea to insure variety and foster roleplaying, but going directly from a scene of tragedy to a comic-relief dialogue, for example, can be very jarring, and spoil the mood.

Keep track of how your players feel about the NPCs; this can help you run scenes to achieve the best effects. If it’s obvious that the players have really come to care about an officer that you know is doomed to die horribly at the hands of a Klingon warrior, then give him more “air time,” and explore the possibilities of his friendship with the Crew. When he finally buys it, the drama will have more impact. If, on the other hand, it’s obvious that the Crew considers the doomed officer to be standoffish and something of a jerk, your scenes should be adjusted accordingly. You can either try to establish sympathy for the officer by inserting a character-establishing scene making him look good, or you can go full-tilt in the opposite direction, making him a *real* jerk (and perhaps an infuriatingly good officer otherwise). Try to inspire one of the Crew to wish him dead—then, when he dies in the very next scene, they’ll have to deal with how they feel about having their wish come true.

Keep constant tabs—both when writing your episode and while running it—on what the stakes are. Ideally, the stakes should rise with (and in fact, be the source of) the overall episode tension. If a scene reveals something impressive, or sets a good atmosphere, but dilutes or low-

ers the stakes prematurely, then the scene needs fixing, or it could undo the strength of your episode.

Include surprises, but don’t force them. An unbelievable surprise is even worse than predictability.

Keep track of the motives of the Crew; they will often change in the face of revelation, even if that wasn’t your intent! When they change, future scenes may need to be “fine-tuned,” and repurposed, on the fly.

Finally, keep track of the expectations of your players, and how they compare to what expectations you’ve *planned* for them. Nothing in an episode should be considered set in stone. If you design a scene for late in Act Two that assumes that the Crew aren’t expecting an ambush, that scene will weaken the episode considerably if they are expecting an ambush by that time. Remove the scene entirely! Replace it with something else, or recast it to fit their expectations. Keep your episodes fluid by keeping your scenes clearly defined, but also disposable and replaceable at need.

The Art of Description

While the *Star Trek Roleplaying Game* benefits from the limitless nature of its special medium—verbal/pen and paper adventure gaming—those same infinite possibilities put a special burden on the Narrator. Or, if you’re feeling a little cocky, they give the Narrator a series of special *opportunities*: The Narrator not only gets to envision alien worlds, terrifying warships, exotic aliens, beautiful space-princesses . . . He also gets to *describe* them. None of those things will take on any life unless the Narrator’s words can spark the imaginations of his players! The good news, though, is that when it works, it works great, and just a few carefully-worded descriptions from the Narrator can come alive as a complete and exciting environment!

LET DETAIL SUGGEST DETAIL

The first rule of description is “less is more.” One of the differences between a passable Narrator and an excellent one is an economy with words. The magic of storytelling lies in understanding that complex scenes can be created in the mind of your players with a few simple “triggers.”

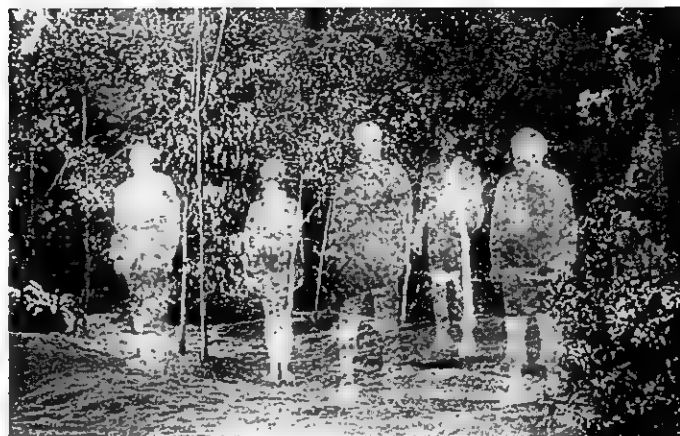
Let's say that an scene you've devised takes place inside a majestic ancient temple on a faraway world. In your mind's eye, you can imagine exactly what it's like to be there: The half-darkness, the cool stone of the walls and floor, the tall crystal light-stalks, rising hundreds of feet toward the vaulted ceiling, the intricate tapestries, the severe and elegant appointments, the grim stature of the guards, the hushed whispers of the acolytes, and the soft pad of the bare feet of pilgrims, admitted one by one to commune with the beings they worship. . . .

And you could go on like that for quite a while, I'm sure. It's a nice image, but including all that detail at once would be a mistake. Tell them only that they have entered a dark, vaulted chamber fashioned of cool stone, and clearly appointed for worship, and you'll give them enough to begin the scene with. More importantly, you'll put the ball back in their court, where it should stay whenever possible! As a player, it's fun to act, to make decisions, to see what effect you can have. It's less fun, usually, to listen to long descriptions.

Here's the magic of it. With only a few details, the mind of each player will create the rest. Maybe one player will imagine the plucking of harp strings in the background. Maybe another will imagine stained-glass windows of some kind. Maybe another will envision a huge and imposing altar.

It's a mistake to insist that your players see wonders that you imagine *exactly* as you imagine them: Understand that it's just fine, in fact it's *better*, if the majority of detail in their imagination comes from *them*. That way, the scene will have real personal impact for them—although you'll get the credit for it! You're guaranteed to excite their sense of wonder when you invite their sense of wonder to play along with you, rather than trying to drown it with details.

Not to disparage details, though! As the scene progresses, you can include more descriptive points, interspersing them with dialogue and action. This gives you the best of both worlds—the players will have an understanding of the locale, sufficient to spark their fancy and let them make reasonable decisions on common ground, and yet the real nature of the place will still come mostly from their own minds.



SHOW, DON'T TELL

This is one of those truths that appear contradictory on the surface. One of the key rules of storytelling is "show, don't tell," but in an RPG, showing requires telling. Unless you have a lot of free time and a costuming budget, you can only describe a Klingon warrior; you can't actually produce one to show your friends at the gaming table. What this rule really means, however, is to select details that demonstrate the features of what you're presenting, instead of merely listing them.

For example, you could just describe the village that the landing party has beamed into like this:

The Transporter is energized, and you arrive in the village. It's clearly primitive, pre-gunpowder. The populace is nervous, frightened at your arrival. It's very hot here. What do you do? They could turn dangerous. In the distance, you see men with primitive weapons approaching.

There's nothing really *wrong* with this description. It's brief enough not to bore the players, and it establishes a few key facts: The Crew are in a primitive village full of nervous, frightened villagers, and it's hot. But it's just raw description. Everything is told, and nothing is shown. Consider this alternate version:

You materialize in the center of the village, and the locals jump away from you, cringing in the midday heat, terrified. One woman screams and



faints! In the distance, a dozen men are practicing with weapons—swords and wooden staves. They stop drilling and cautiously begin to approach. What do you do?

The second version is only slightly longer, and it conveys much of the same information. The difference is that, except for the heat (which is still an explicit detail), the information is conveyed in the form of action. We know the village is primitive because they're practicing with ancient weapons—blades and sticks. We know the villages are scared, and potentially dangerous, because they're backing away, cringing, screaming and fainting, and approaching with weapons in hand. Rather than just *telling* the players, you've *shown* them. By telling it, better!

For more on applying this rule to people, see "First Appearances," on page 17.

DECORATE WITH DETAIL

Keep the camera in your mind rolling at all times. Tiny details added to actions and dialogue are powerful things that can make the difference between a satisfactory game and an unforgettable one. While a measure of brevity and elegance is always the goal, don't let that stop you from pouncing on opportunities to drop tiny, atmospheric points of detail.

For example, rather than saying "He hands you the scroll," try out "He blows dust from the scroll, and gently places it into your hands. It feels fragile." Since you had to take the time to mention the NPC acting, anyway, it makes

sense to get the most out of your time by adding a sensual note or two along the way. Again, this detail will suggest other details, so there's no need to go on describing the scroll's yellowed paper or the soft crackle as it's opened—things like that will be supplied by the players.

ENGAGE EVERY SENSE

Take care in every scene to engage each of the senses (or rather, the *imagined* senses) of the Crew. It's easy to remember to describe what the scary Gorn looks like, or to suggest the sound of his voice if he speaks—but what does he smell like? What does his leathery hide feel like as he grapples you with intent to toss you against a bulkhead? Is that the acrid taste of your own fresh blood in your mouth? And that pain behind your eyes as they fill with water . . . the Gorn is moving toward you again, his breath hot and rank—you feel dizzy as you grope for your phaser . . .

The "let detail suggest detail rule" applies, of course: No need to describe every scale on the Gorn's hide, or every nuance of his breath. Just a few hints, and a few strong and simple adjectives will go a very long way toward making your imagined settings come to life. Settings with no smell, taste and texture will seem less than half-real; avoid them!

BACKGROUND NOISE

As long as you're engaging the senses, engage them with some details that reminds the players that they are in a living place. A *Star Trek Roleplaying Game* episode will feel more *lifelike* if the Narrator remembers to include a healthy dose of "background noise"—information that doesn't really have anything to do with the plot. Background noise establishes atmosphere, awakens the imagination of the players and makes the whole experience more immersive. Without it, scenes can be lifeless and feel "phony."

When you're addressing a cagey Orion pirate captain in his forested hidey-hole on a forgotten moon, the scene takes on more *life* if you hear the sounds of his men engaged in shooting practice in the woods around you! And then, what if one of the "practice" fights turns serious,

distracting the pirate you're engaged in negotiations with? "Excuse me," he might say. "I have matters to attend with my men." This might leave you stranded to listen to the sounds of him administering discipline, or maybe you'll follow him to see what transpires . . .

Perhaps the fight is part of the story, and perhaps not. The Crew might well *make* it one, if they insist on tagging along . . . and that creates opportunities for *you*, the Narrator. Either way, by remembering that everybody in your story is busy with their own lives, and that space stations, cities, and even remote camps are often bustling with activity and life, you can narrate an episode that will feel more real to your players.

Sometimes, background noise is just sensory detail as described above—the sounds of distant sparring, the shriek of an unseen bird, the steady *thrummm* of a ship's systems, the rowdy tumble of voices at a party. Background noise can also be a hook for an amusing distraction: the sparring that gets serious; a sudden cry of pain from a nearby alley; a small child tugging at the sleeve of an officer's uniform because he wants to play with the shiny phaser! Such "noises" are hooks that can be taken or left by the players, and worked into the larger plot if the situation requires it.

Think of background noise as a kind of spice—every scene needs a little, but be judicious and moderate, because a little goes a long way. Keep actual background events very limited—it's great to introduce slice-of-life detail to a scene, but taken to extremes, you can distract too much from the real story. One or two mood-setting background events per episode is usually sufficient.

It can help to make a quick list of "background" items that you can drop into the game at will. Sometimes, you'll want to include a particular element in a particular scene, but it's often handy to have a list of "generic" events and sensory tidbits to throw at the episode when needed. Some examples to inspire your own creations:

STARSHIP/SPACE STATION BACKGROUND EVENTS

- *Something breaks loose! Maybe it's a prisoner escaping a detention area; maybe it's an experiment getting out of a laboratory.*

- *There is a sudden lurch, and then darkness, as the part of the ship/station the Crew are currently in loses power and switches to auxiliary. After a few seconds, everything returns to normal.*
- *Sensors detect a previously-uncharted but otherwise unremarkable comet, gas cloud or other deep-space phenomenon.*

URBAN BACKGROUND EVENTS

- *The Crew witnesses a petty crime being committed—a pickpocket, a mugging, a brawl, or maybe even an obviously illegal entry into private property.*
- *A personal vehicle can be seen nearby, sitting wide open, apparently abandoned. The owner is nowhere to be seen.*
- *A parade or other large celebration is underway, and some revelers are gesturing an invitation to the Crew to take more direct part in it.*

OUTDOORS (PLANETSIDE) BACKGROUND EVENTS

- *A wild animal skulks nearby, making threatening noises (or the alien equivalent—maybe a threatening odor?) but clearly trying to keep a safe distance.*
- *In the distance, one of the Crew notices large rocks vanishing into the ground, being (apparently) sucked under, one at a time.*





- *Some native children, at play nearby, begin heading deeper into an area that looks overgrown and potentially hazardous.*

STARSHIP/SPACE STATION SENSORY TIDBITS

- *An group of off-duty officers wanders by, singing what sounds like an old Orion drinking song, in at least three different keys.*
- *An acrid, ozone smell fills the corridor as a technician works on some exposed wiring.*
- *A rush of warm air is felt as the door to a Vulcan's quarters swishes open; its occupant strides out, on his way to attend his duties.*
- *The Crew passes by a large mural, painted in the style of an alien culture the ship or station recently hosted diplomatic meetings with.*

URBAN BACKGROUND SENSORY TIDBITS

- *Waves of heat rising from the streets on a hot day.*
- *Garish and possibly amusing billboards and posters.*
- *Somebody passes by playing irritatingly loud music.*
- *The mouthwatering smell of hot food from a nearby vendor.*

OUTDOORS (PLANETSIDE) SENSORY TIDBITS

- *A fresh breeze brings the strong and heady smell of alien vegetation.*
- *In the distance, the rush and gurgle of a stream or fresh spring can be heard.*
- *Large flowers snap shut whenever the Crew passes within a meter or so of them. A minute after they walk away, the flowers slowly open again.*
- *The ground beneath the Crew's feet is slightly spongy; it feels strange to walk on and retains deep footprints.*

THE HUMBLE NPC

Among the simplest ways to be a memorable Narrator—one who'll be talked about in game-shops and around convention tables by satisfied players for years to come—is to play your NPCs well, to bring the people of the *Star Trek* universe to life for your players. That's *really* true; while every part of this book provides tools for becoming a better Narrator, that's one of the "tricks" of really awakening the imagination of a player; it can be more important than all the subtext and theme and narrative structure in the world.

Why is it so? Without engaging dialogue, a roleplaying game is "just a game." Deciding what dramatic or tactical choices your character will make is great fun, but without the opportunity to "be" that character in dialogue, the whole experience loses a dimension. But when that dimension is present and the NPCs are believable and engaging, the entire experience is enriched. Honestly, even a lackluster plot can be glossed over with entertaining dialogue-encounters and a few improvised mysteries and fight scenes, but that's not a trick you want to resort to often.

In this section, we'll examine exactly how to make your supporting cast memorable.

A CAST OF THOUSANDS?

Don't overpopulate your scenes with NPCs. Like all Narrator's tools, non-player characters should be used judiciously, and never be allowed to saturate a scene or overshadow the Crew. The NPCs are there to provide a dialogue-based *interface* between the Crew and the universe they live in; you don't want them so numerous that your players can't remember who's who. In particular, avoid the temptation to let NPC Captains and other guest stars make choices and take actions that rightly belong to the story's heroes.

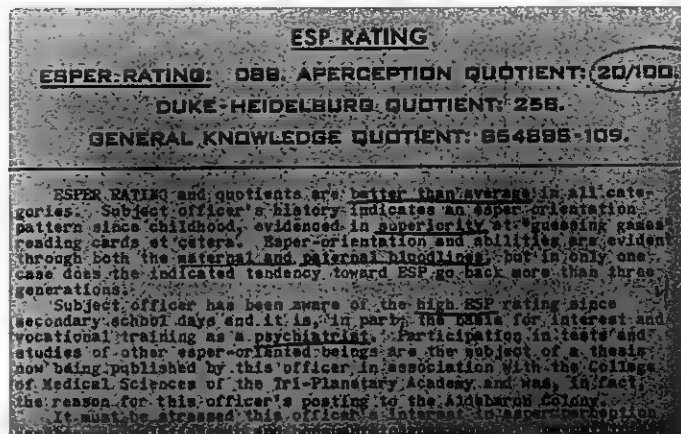
That said, every Act (and most scenes) should include in-character dialogue for everybody to enjoy. In general, games work best if no more than a handful of new NPCs are introduced in an episode—maybe five or six at the outside. This doesn't include random passers-by that the Crew stops to ask for directions, of course—just NPCs with names and identities that have some genuine influence on the plot.

One excellent way to get the most of your supporting cast is to reuse NPCs whenever it makes sense. Recurring minor characters give a series a sense of continuity and realism, makes interesting PC/NPC relationships possible (a fine source of subplots) and makes things easier on both the Narrator and the players. Recurring NPCs are easier to remember, easier for the Narrator to roleplay entertainingly, and take a bit of brain-strain out of the process on all sides.

ASSIGN A DEFINITE FUNCTION

Good NPCs are assigned a specific story function, fulfill that function, and then fade from view to let the "camera" return its focus to the stars of the show—the Crew. In a sense, every NPC exists to create opportunities for the "real" characters to look good!

So, assign any NPC you create a specific function. This isn't the motive of the character itself; rather, it's the goal you, the Narrator, have set for the NPC in the overall plot. The following sections detail some of the most common NPC functions:



Exposition

The NPC is there to directly provide information to the Crew. A superior officer giving a mission-briefing is an exposition-oriented NPC. So is a street urchin who can inform the Crew of goings-on in the local underworld, or a captured spy that the Crew interrogates.

Hazard

The NPC is a physical threat to the Crew or to something they care about (like their ship, or another NPC). This doesn't mean the character is there to simply leap out and attack—like any NPC, a hazardous character should be motivated and have a personality that will entertain the players.

Santa Claus

A "Santa Claus" NPC is there to give the PCs something—usually an object or item of equipment, which is in turn usually a plot device.

Quaint Native Folkways

Sometimes NPCs exist just to provide atmosphere—rather than giving the Crew information directly, they are information about the local culture, prevailing public mood, or whatever else the Narrator wants to convey.

Additional Functions

Most NPCs exist to either provide the Crew with something, or threaten them. If the NPC isn't the most important encounter in a scene, then they typically just do that, and then cease to matter (until they reappear in later

scenes, perhaps, with a different function). If, however, the meeting the NPC is the primary point of the scene, then they'll typically have some kind of combined function: a reward and a challenge. An example of this is a guard who must be tricked or bribed to obtain a password, or a ship's captain who must be parleyed-with to avoid a fight and gain an ally!

Of course, very important NPCs can have much more detailed roles, but for most NPCs, it's helpful if the Narrator assigns a specific function for the character, and keeps that function in mind at all times when running the character. This can help a scene keep from lagging, and improve the pace and quality of the game.

WHERE THE NARRATOR ENDS

A good NPC is immediately recognizable. There's nothing duller or more confusing than not being able to tell the Supporting Cast apart from the Narrator (let alone one another). When you begin speaking as an NPC, the players should be instantly aware that you've slipped into character. There are a number of simple "tip-offs" which make the transition between Narrator and NPC (or between NPC and *another* NPC) easily apparent:

Establish Distance

"Hey you there! I say, look up here! Hello?" By changing your voice just enough to make it plain that you're meant to be a character twenty meters down a corridor, or on top of a nearby cliff, or behind a corner, you can make it very obvious that you (sitting right there in your chair) aren't you, just now.



Mannerisms and Habits

"[sniffing, scratching furiously at the side of his head] I don't think I like that idea; no, I'm certain I don't [scratch, scratch]." Small physical gestures can become "trade-marked" habits of NPCs, letting your players know that one is speaking before the first word comes out of your mouth.

In-Character Address

"Commander Richards? I was wondering if I might speak to you about these reports." One that you can use a lot without wearing it out. If the NPC is on a name-basis with one of the Crew, he can identify himself as an NPC very quickly by directly addressing the character by name.

Do the Voices

"[In a deep Klingon voice] CAPTAIN! I will have your LIVER for that!" It doesn't need to be significantly different from your normal speaking voice—a small change in tone or depth, provided it becomes distinctly associated with the NPC in question, can be sufficient. On the other hand, sometimes it's fun to impersonate a favorite celebrity, adopt a slight regional (or invented) accent, or something similar; if it's an obscure actor, the players might not even realize you're doing an impression!

Slang and Dialect

"I would advise yez ta keep dialin', Oxmyx." By using phrases, terms, or even just ordinary words that you don't normally use when speaking, you can establish character quickly. This can be as extreme as a string of invented alien swear-words, or as simple as using slightly more formal speech than you do ordinarily.

Facial Expression

By putting on the same bland, condescendingly bored expression every time you play your recurring Vulcan ambassador, or the same open-mouthed happy smile for your roguish space-trader, and so on, you can provide another simple cue to establish character soundlessly.

Body Language

By the same token, character can be established with more subtle kinds of body language—shoulders back or

chest thrust out, for example, or cocking your head to one side, or slouching.

Props

"[waving a toy phaser around casually] Just escort me to the transporter room, quietly, and nobody gets hurt. Understand?" They don't fit in in every play-group (and overusing them can make a game sillier than it's meant to be), but the occasional prop can, again, make an NPC stand out instantly. And with the thousands of *Star Trek* toys and bits of memorabilia floating around, convincing props can be easy to acquire.

It's best to assign one or two permanent "tip-offs" to any NPC who you intend to bring back in future episodes. More than two is usually unnecessary! Obviously, some of the methods work better as "permanents" than others—it's unlikely that any character will *always* be 20 meters down a corridor, for instance .

FIRST APPEARANCES

Good NPCs have clearly-defined motives and personalities that can be summarized simply. Their motives might not always be apparent (after all, many will be secret), and their personalities will often be more complex and subtle than first-blush appearances might suggest (especially for long-running NPCs, or those with secret motives!), but the "public face" of any really successful NPC is simple.

Furthermore, the personality of any NPC should be very clearly demonstrated the first time they appear in the series. That's meant literally: their personality should be *demonstrated*, not simply described, or passed on through the impressions of another NPC. This is an example of the classic "show, don't tell" rule of storytelling that applies to *any* medium (see pg. 11).

For example, suppose the Narrator has decided that the Crew will encounter a wrecked starship drifting in a decaying planetary orbit. Sensors read dozens of life-forms on board, all tiny, with only *one* that might be a person. The tiny life forms are ratlike animals from the planet below, infesting the vessel. The remaining person is the ship's only survivor, a Tellarite engineer named Jogath who the



Narrator has decided is half-mad and somewhat sadistic. He just wants to be left alone to kill the ratlike things, but he's important to the story because he can feed clues to the Crew to help them find out what happened to the ship.

The Narrator wants Jogath to make a strong impression from the start, and he wants to quickly establish his madness. So, when the crew beams aboard the ship, they find, not Jogath, but one of the animals, following a trail of bits of food, neatly laid out in a row, leading to a crude trap set against a bulkhead. They arrive just in time to see the creature take the last of the bait and get trapped, and then Jogath appears, laughing like a maniac and banging on the outside of the trap, screaming Tellarite curses at the small pest. He pulls out a long, sharp blade and announces (to himself and perhaps the rodent) that he's going to snip the small creature's limbs off one-by-one . . . and then he notices the Crew, smiles, and waits for them to approach. He doesn't sheathe the knife; he holds it ready, obviously apprehensive.

Jogath, to say the least, has made an impression—and both the sadistic and paranoid nature of his personality has been clearly demonstrated. From there, the Crew will have something to go on when dealing with the mad Tellarite.

Of course, insane or otherwise extreme NPCs are the easiest to make memorable, but the same principles can be applied to more subtle personality types. To establish that an alien princess is shy around strangers, have her demonstrate this by keeping physically close to her elders, tugging on their sleeves to keep them from walking away.

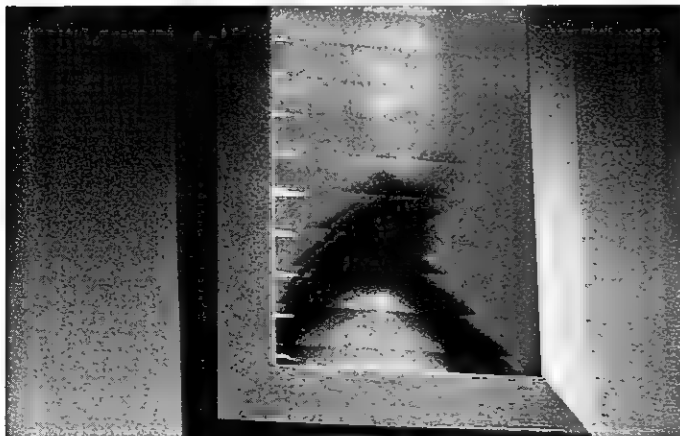
To establish that a ship's captain is calm and unflappable, introduce him in the middle of an incident that would inspire an ordinary captain to a rage—but have him deal with it like a gentleman. Actions, as always, speak louder than words—even though the action in the *Star Trek Roleplaying Game* is just as verbal, most of the time, as the dialogue! By establishing a character trait with action, you create a more memorable character right from the beginning, something that later encounters can build and expand on.

Damage Control

You're prepared. You're energetic. Your mood is perfect, your episode is tightly-plotted, your players are eager. But something still goes wrong! In gameplay, easily half the Narrator's job is "damage control"—keeping the game on track despite unexpected snags: frustrated players, challenges that turn out to be too easy or too deadly, a lagging pace, a sidetracked plot. Sometimes these problems mount up so rapidly that the Narrator is left feeling helpless in the face of them, convinced that he isn't cut out to run a game. In this section, we'll explore these common obstacles and what "fixes" are available to troubleshoot an ailing episode in the middle of play.

WHEN IN DOUBT, INJECT RISK

Maybe you let a clue slip too early, and Act Two has been reduced to a quick arrest in sickbay . . . Or maybe you realized too late that three different exposition scenes in a row weren't a good idea! You're flailing, lost—what to do?



Pulp-detective writer Raymond Chandler had a rule for getting the plot "unstuck" in a crime novel: "When in doubt, have two men with guns burst into the room." The rule works. The sudden addition of risk to a story is almost *never* a bad idea, and when you've hit one of those moments where you're confused and helpless, and your players are there staring at you, hanging on your words, it's a last-ditch solution you can count on. It doesn't have to be men with guns, of course—it can be a sudden explosion that seals off a corridor, an unexpected pirate vessel, and so on.

Like any other emergency measure (using your seat as a flotation device, biting down on the cyanide capsule in your tooth), it should be saved for truly desperate moments, but it can work wonders, and here's why:

IT DELAYS THE CREW...

If the corridor suddenly caves in or if two men with disruptors appear, the situation must be dealt with. While it's being dealt with, you, the Narrator, have more time to get the rest of the plot arranged in your head.

IT ENTERTAINS THE PLAYERS...

The delay doesn't feel like a delay, because you're giving the players a chance to show off what the Crew can deal with. They'll love you for it.

IT CREATES NEW HOOKS...

Naturally, the two men will ultimately need a reason for being there—and this creates an opportunity for you to fashion any kind of "bridge" your plot needs to get back on track.

A CAVEAT...

One caveat is in order, though: Avoid the temptation to raise the stakes of the whole story just to maintain tension in moments like these. A collapsing corridor or distant explosion can always be tied to a subplot. Two men can enter a room with guns for a variety of reasons that need

n't have anything to do with the "main" problem of the episode. This trick works because it gives so much and demands so little—but introducing a problem that jacks up the stakes on the story (especially a series-wide story arc) can come back to haunt you. In other words, when it comes time to explain the two men, it's safer to establish that they're thugs of the opposition rather than agents of a secret division of Starfleet that you've never mentioned before. If you can pull it off, it's even better to make them thugs of an unrevealed opposition—that way, you can use them as seeds to form the basis of the plot of a later episode.

WHEN PLAYERS DESPAIR

During the course of a normal *Star Trek Roleplaying Game* episode, the mood at the gaming table can range all over; sometimes you'll have a tableful of giddy idiots, pelting each other with corn chips and quoting their favorite British TV shows. Once the story absorbs the group, the prevailing mood can range from the triumphant thrill of victory to the depths of frustration and despair as they circle around one of the episode's challenges, unable to make headway.

Many Narrators, especially those new to life behind the Narrator's Screen, can get sucked into those despairing moments themselves. If the players get lost and frustrated, so does the Narrator, who feels that the fun episode he planned so hard for is collapsing around him!

So, the first step is: Buck up.

The second step is: Give them an excuse to motivate *themselves* into action. You don't need to spoon-feed the "right" path to them. Simply rescuing them will cheapen the experience! Rather, give them fresh choices, and reward success with fresh clues. When the players are feeling down, give them a chance to boost themselves up! It's *your* episode, so don't feel constrained by the plot "as written" if a few changes will make it more fun for your group. This is true even if you're the one who did the writing!

The Crew are trapped in an ancient ruin, and the air is running out. They can't figure out the strange puzzle of the architecture, and you've



already established that their communicators are useless, since the ruin is under three kilometers of solid rock permeated with a weird magnetic field. In the episode outline, you wrote that escape is possible by sliding the multiple arms of an alien statue so that they all point toward the carving of the planet's moon on the floor—but it never occurred to the players that the arms were moveable! They're now wandering around, growing weak from slow asphyxiation and trying to carve through the rock with their phasers, which are quickly becoming drained.

What to do? The episode, as written, provides no additional clues apart from a cryptic bit of dialogue about "pointing toward Ral-Kava" that went in one ear and out the other in an earlier scene with the keepers of the temple. The Crew knows that Ral-Kava is the moon, and they've seen the moon carved on the floor (one of them, bless his hopeful heart, even tried standing there and solemnly pointing at it). So, what can be done?

INTRODUCE AN NPC

According to the episode as written, they are alone in the ruin. But we're not letting the "as-written" version stop us, remember? Instead, one of the aliens fell into the ruin with them. He's managed to avoid the players so far, but they spot him, and he flees. The Crew must earn the information he has by capturing him and convincing him to talk.

ADD A CLUE

The Crew stumble upon a chamber that isn't on your map—a beautiful place covered in colorful mosaics. The mosaics show a figure, a lot like the one the old statue represents—with all its arms outstretched toward Ral-Kava. Hmmm. What might that mean?

INTRODUCE AN ALTERNATE ROUTE

If they're really determined to carve their way out with phasers, and seem content to both despair and ignore any concessional bones you toss them, let it work. See "moving targets," below. Letting their solution become more right than your own is preferable to having them asphyxiate underground! Make it dangerous, though—superheated rock threatening to detonate pockets of gases, big chunks of stone raining down, the works.

UPS AND DOWNS

When they're down, throw them a rope, but make it a tricky rope. "Fate must always favor trouble," after all. If a *deus ex machina* ("god from the machine") is necessary, make sure it's a grumpy god, and one that doesn't work cheap.

By the same token, when they're up, keep them *earning* it. As the Narrator, you have the power to control the level of challenge present in the game at all times. Provided you do so fairly, and nothing ever comes too cheaply, you can bat the party mood back and forth like a shuttlecock, if the mood strikes you to. Of course, since they *are* your friends, it's usually best just to keep them entertained!

MOVING TARGETS AND BUILDING ON SIDETRACKS

It will often happen that the Narrator places a goal in what he believes is plain sight—and the Crew manages to miss it by miles (or Astronomical Units, or light-years, or whole galaxies, depending on the scale of the episode!) In a simple mystery plot, the Narrator places the Secret



Klingon Outpost inside a mountain on Lyricon IV . . . At every important encounter, a clue pointing to either Lyricon IV or to another clue (which in turn points to Lyricon IV) is carefully placed. The Crew finds these clues . . . and can't put two and two together . . . They are coming up with theories, and they seem to be really trying, but Lyricon IV doesn't strike them as "Klingonish" enough, and they disregard the possibility early on, and never return to it.

So, the Narrator becomes desperate. He no longer leaves the clues lying casually around, waiting to be discovered like starlets in a soda shop. Instead, the clues begin to leap up from the floor and tickle the Crew on the nose—blatant Lyricon IV artifacts found in Klingon wreckage, soil samples that the ship's computer insists can only come from a Lyricon IV, Klingon uniforms with "I built my hidden outpost on Lyricon IV and all I got was this crummy uniform" stenciled on them in bold letters. In English. On both sides. And the Crew still doesn't get it.

So, the Narrator hangs his head as the members of his Crew pat themselves on the back for their cleverness in deducing that the Klingon outpost is, without a doubt, on Galakor II. They lay in a course. The Narrator sighs.

This is an extreme example of a problem that will, on some level, plague any episode with a plot more choice-oriented than "shoot the bad guy when he tries to shoot you." The solution is simple: The Klingon outpost is right there on Galakor II, where it always was. The plot advances, and now the challenge is getting in safely . . .

Now, this is "cheating," of a kind, and no doubt about it. But it's the kind of damage-control decision that any Narrator must face in nearly every game-session. It's a

question of balancing the goal of being “realistic” with the goal of playing a fun game. Wandering around on Galakor II for an hour of gameplay, interviewing farmers and being bored, isn’t fun, and fun is the more important goal . . . So, the smart Narrator simply plucks the Klingon outpost from one mountain and moves it a few parsecs away to another. The Crew gets to feel proud of their deductive skills, the Narrator gets to use the nifty Klingon outpost he designed, and everybody has a good time. All those Lyricon IV artifacts? Clever bait set by the Klingons, of course, which the Crew were clever enough to ignore! Rather than letting the game become sidetracked, the Narrator simply makes the “sidetrack” into the main highway, and the players are none the wiser.

A final note on this point: The players should probably *stay* none the wiser. A good Narrator, like a good stage magician, doesn’t explain his tricks, even though he may be tempted. To explain to the players after the game that you moved the Klingon outpost just to keep the game moving will undermine the players’ sense of achievement and put a stain on their memory of the game. It’s up to you to decide, ultimately, whether to gloat. But it’s usually best to let your players keep their sense of achievement—it’s one of the reasons they play *Star Trek*.

MORE LAG-FIXES: THE SWITCHEROO

Sometimes, a scene will lag even if nothing else is really going *wrong* with it. The dialogue with the prisoner has become repetitive, the fight with the Klingons is taking too long, the puzzle is solvable, but the steps seem tedious and mechanical . . .

The solution is always *change*. In particular, one trick that works well is to jump-track on the type of scene you’re running. This means:

To fix a lagging action scene, make it a dialogue or puzzle scene: It may seem foolish to make a scene more exciting by removing action, but it really works, because you’re not just removing action, you’re removing action that’s already proven itself to be uninteresting, and replacing it with something fresh. This means that entirely different parts of the players’



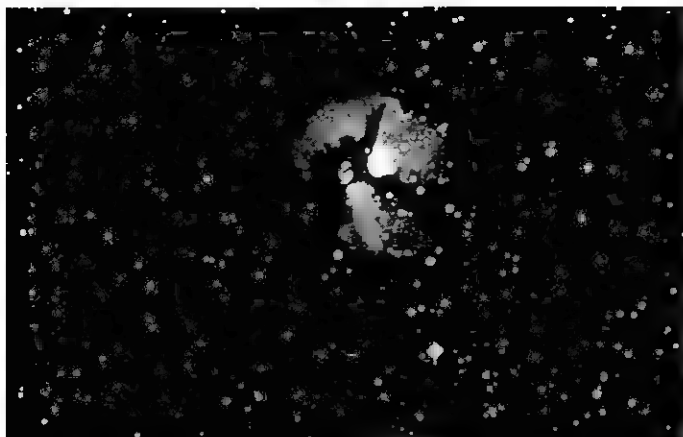
imagination will be “put online,” and that will make them alert and interested. So, turn a fight into a parley, as the Klingon warrior reveals a desire to bargain, or takes a hostage and makes demands, or tries to “call out” a higher-up Federation officer “worthy” of his blade. Turn a chase into a puzzle, as the Crew ducks into a doorway only to find they’ve stumbled upon something wondrous . . . even if it’s something wondrous you’d had saved up for a later scene.

To fix a lagging dialogue or puzzle scene, make it an action scene: Again, the principle is that the real value is in the change. Just as going from action to thinking can wake the players up, going from thinking to moving can do the same. Never hesitate to interrupt an overlong conversation with a convenient knife in the back of the NPC, or a distant cry for help, or an explosion, or simply a sudden attack.

This “switcheroo” method works better in many cases than trying to stoke up the scene within its own parameters. Break the rules, and pump up the volume.

RULES DISAGREEMENTS

Good players won’t usually call you on a game-rule in the middle of play. They’ll wait until a snack-break, or until after the episode is concluded, and then come to you with their problem. But sometimes, if it’s important to the story, even a good player will feel the need to say something in mid-play.



At this point, you must remember a very vital concept: *There's nothing worse than stopping the game to look up a rule.* And certainly, avoid an argument if you can. If you think your "call" on the matter was fair and consistent with other calls that have been made in the past, say so, and promise that you'll look the rule up after the game, and correct things appropriately in the future. And then keep that promise.

But, before you do that, consider the situation carefully to make sure that your call was fair and consistent. In the heat of action, sometimes even the best Narrators make quick judgements to keep things moving, and sometimes hasty judgements won't be as fair as those that have been given a bit of thought. The rules are yours to break, of course, but do so only with good reason—they exist to provide a platform on which expectations can rest.

Players generally won't feel slighted as long as they feel you're being fair, giving their ideas a proper chance to be tested, and giving their characters their fair share of chances to show off. If for some reason (maybe real-life problems that put you or one of the players in a touchy mood) things still go badly over a rules disagreement, it's often wisest to simply adjourn the game as amicably as possible.

Again, play a switcheroo—don't just say "This sucks. Everybody go home." Instead, say "If we go on like this we won't be having any fun—want to play a boardgame instead?" (Make sure to pick a simple one that doesn't cause rules arguments!) Or, even better, go rent some episodes of *Star Trek*, so you'll all be in the right mood next time!

ASSORTED PRINCIPLES OF PERFECTION

There are no perfect Narrators, or perfect players, or perfect episodes, or perfect games. It's fun, though, to work toward our ideals, to race with ourselves, to know what it feels like to be *good* at Narrating a *Star Trek Roleplaying Game*. The principles that follow are a handful (a rather large handful, but still only a beginning) of notions drawn from years of gaming experience; each builds on and complements the other. If the rest of this book is brain-food, these are very healthy snacks.

ENJOY A LIMITLESS MEDIUM

The *Star Trek Roleplaying Game* draws its inspiration from the classic television show, and the films that later followed. But with the RPG, you can go a lot further than the show or the films ever did. In a roleplaying game, there is no special effects budget, the props all get built on time (and they all look perfect), the "stars of the show" don't cost millions of dollars (in fact, they can often be convinced to pay for the pizza), and you get to shoot on-location, in the depths of space. Because the game is all in your mind, the *Star Trek Roleplaying Game* can fulfil the promise of *Star Trek* even better than the TV show or the films—the action can be wilder, the locations more real, the scope grander. And, because you're playing with friends, it can also be more personal . . . Characters can change more, grow more, and experience things that are exciting to roleplay, even if they wouldn't be that interesting to watch on a screen. In both directions, the Narrator and the players have infinity, waiting for them to jump in and enjoy.

DO SOMETHING NEW EVERY EPISODE

Variety, as they say, is the spice. While it's important to have a relaxed attitude about clichés (clichés are your friends; never abandon them!), it's equally important to make a point of doing something that's new and fresh in every episode you run. You don't have to reinvent the wheel, either—it just has to be fresh to *you*. Have you

Narrated a romantic subplot, yet? Have you ever included a sympathetic Romulan character? Have you used props? Handouts? If you've done all of those things, then do something entirely other. It doesn't have to be a big thing: just a tiny detail, a minor twist, to keep your creative muscles limber and healthy, and your horizons unblocked by your past successes.

The cumulative effect of this simple exercise will be impressive, and your players will notice it. Narrators, like any other kind of writer, often find themselves falling into creative patterns, and their work can get predictable or stale, especially when the audience is the same small group of friends. Embrace change as heartily as you embrace the traditions of *Star Trek*, and you will have hit upon the vital formula for making your games good ones.

UNDERSTAND THE GOALS

It's important, right from the start of your series or episode, to acknowledge that there are two sets of goals that determine the outcome of the game: the goals of the real people playing the game, and the goals of the fictional characters in the game. That may seem very elementary, but more games have gone sour from somebody forgetting this than from any other mistake a Narrator (or player) can make. Keep the two sets of goals from influencing the other, and your game will be stronger.

For example, a common type of "goal confusion" involves character success . . . Starfleet officers, naturally, want to succeed: they want to get the girl, beat the bad guy, maybe earn a promotion, and someday a command. So, a fundamental goal on the fictional side of things is success. Of course, drama being what it is, sometimes even the best officers suffer severe setbacks. Players (particularly very young or very new players) sometimes get *personally* upset with this . . . They aren't happy unless their character *always* succeeds, even when it's both fair and dramatic that they don't. New-to-the-game Narrators can make the same mistake by identifying too closely with the goals of the episode's villain—taking it personally when the Crew finds a weakness to exploit and defeats him "too soon." In both cases, a real person is letting his own goals become confused with the goals of a character.



The goals of the real people playing the *Star Trek* RPG are social: to explore a story together, to entertain one another, to play a game of dramatic "what if?" Interestingly, this means that failure can be fun to experience, because it gives you new, gratifying opportunities to roleplay, and inspires new, creative ways to turn a setback into a success, anyway. Similarly, the "early defeat" of a villain is a great excuse to explore a plot-twist—and a good time for one of the villain's underlings to seize power!

The problem can move in the other direction, too: Some players, wanting very much to entertain the others at the table, have their *characters* behave in ways that are ridiculous or extreme, inconsistent with the character's reasonable sense of self-preservation or even dignity. These are dangers to watch out for, and the best games are those where every player (and the Narrator) is working for the goal of mutual entertainment, while the *characters* are struggling to succeed.

ON THE OTHER HAND . . .

The Narrator must always keep in mind that players *do* identify with their characters; that's part of the fun of roleplaying. And the better the game, the more this will happen. So even good players might be a little dismayed if an officer they've portrayed for six months suddenly has his head removed by a stray disruptor shot. Nothing in sickbay for that kind of problem . . . And while throwing the rulebook across the room and stomping out in anger isn't a mature response to character death, being a little sad about it is very reasonable.

Bad things happen. And if you're being fair and consistent, bad things *should* happen, now and again. Without failure, success is pointless—there's nothing negative to compare it to, no downs to measure the ups by. That said, character failure (especially the ultimate "failure"—the death of a cherished player character) should always be dramatic and have meaning. It's much better to die sacrificing one's self for others (as Spock did in *Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan*) than by a random disruptor shot, and the Narrator should regard steering character death in the direction of drama as an important part of being fair. *Star Trek* characters, when they die, should die meaningfully, preferably performing "one last vital action" or at least falling into the warp core of the enemy and ruining his day!

PROMOTE FRIENDSHIP IN YOUR GROUP

Most gaming groups are groups of friends to begin with, especially when the gamers are young. But as we get older, we meet more and more of our gaming partners at game shops, or online, or at conventions, and that means less and less contact away from the gaming table. And that's okay, of course. But gaming, like any other form of social contact, is best among friends. Believe it or not, you can improve your campaign by arranging the occasional social get-together for your group that doesn't involve dice or Klingons. Or, perhaps just as good, Klingons projected on a *screen* of some kind, rather than Klingons in your mind!

This is doubly true if the "core" of your group are good friends, but a few "outside" newcomers are part of the game. Making the newcomers feel more like part of the

group is something that can only be half-accomplished from behind the snazzy screen that came with this book. Set aside an afternoon for a movie or a hike in the park, and your gaming group—and your game—will improve.

LEARN TO LOVE SURPRISES

At the risk of serious self-contradiction: Don't worry too much about the episode's plot. What I mean is, by all means *have* a plot, and very certainly do your best to make sure it's interesting, self-consistent, tension-building, and suited for your group. But then don't *worry* about it. The fact is, plot isn't as important to an episode of the *Star Trek Roleplaying Game* as it is to an episode of *Star Trek*, the television show.

As Narrator, you must learn to enjoy being surprised. You should, ideally, get a royal kick out of the idea of your carefully-constructed storyline being shredded and tossed down a wormhole by your players. Because that's exactly what's going to happen.

I mean, it will if you're *lucky*. There's nothing more dull than playing out an adventure that goes exactly as you've planned it. That's an episode, after all, that you've already "seen" in your head. The real episode comes when your plot makes contact with the Crew—and if both the plot and the Crew are good, then neither will get through the experience without change.

This is another one of those points that sometimes strikes novice Narrators as absurd or at least very frustrating, but it really sits at the core of what's *fun* about being the Narrator. Not only do you get to be the entire universe (in a sense, at least), you get to be the entire universe *without really knowing what's going to happen to you*. Just as good players enjoy the challenges and unexpected twists of a good story, good Narrators take pleasure (even a perverse, twisted kind of glee) in rolling with the punches that the Crew will inevitably throw into the gut of the plotline. While only a very foolhardy Narrator *relies entirely* on his ability to improvise, a good one understands that a sharp Crew will *require* him to improvise rather a lot, anyway. And that's when the *really* fun stuff happens.

You need a plot as a starting point—and as a kind of navigational beacon to sit at the center of the wild orbit



that is the actions of the typical Crew—but don't become emotionally *attached* to the thing. It's there to provide structure where needed, not to vainly *impose* structure where it isn't wanted. Let the Crew make the story their own, and learn to revel in that process, and you'll enjoy your games that much more.

SMILE

The Narrator is a showman! It may seem corny, but your players will respond better if you keep a cheerful disposition when running the game (especially at the beginning). If you're feeling frustrated with yourself, or if you had a trying day at work, let it go. Relax. Enjoy being with friends, enjoy playing the game, and let it show that you are. Also, there's nothing like a smile to put your players on edge and keep them nervous and paranoid, and that's worth its weight in gold.

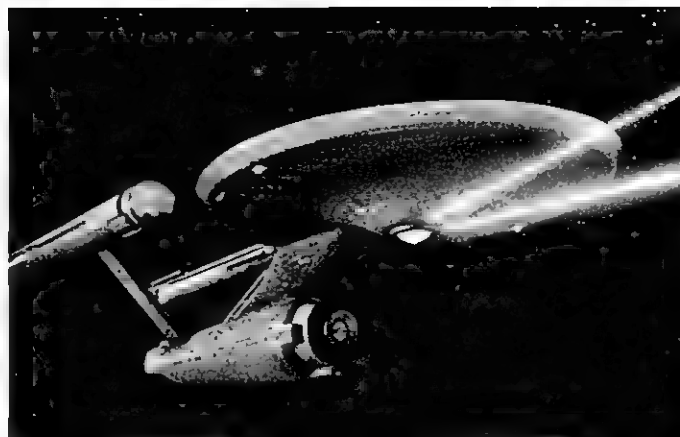
STARDATE OPTIONAL

After every episode you run, take the time to make an entry in your own private "Captain's Log." Jot down the major events of the episode in a few paragraphs—remember to include the names of any NPCs that might reappear, any threads that might arise later, and any interesting revelations that could have long-term effects.

Then, note the fun parts. Make a particular note of your favorite moment of the evening—maybe it was the tension in the air when the Crew confronted the corrupt Andorian gangster; maybe it was the point where the timing clicked just *perfectly* in the big fight, and everybody felt great. Maybe it was the moment when the Vulcan science officer couldn't pronounce a word right, and ended up laughing like a loon at himself and squirting Coke out of his nose. No matter what, write it down. Jot down other favorite moments, too, if there were lots of memorable ones.

Then, note the crummy parts. Did that street battle drag too long? Did the clever mystery fail to be clever or mysterious? Did your scary monster make the group giggle? Write it down.

Ideally, these notes should come from a combination of your own observations of the game and the players



observations. If you have the time, include a little "What went right? What went wrong?" dialogue at the end of every game session. But if that isn't feasible for whatever reason, do your best to pay close attention, then write it all down.

At first, these entries will be of little use. But after a dozen sessions or more have passed under the bridge, you'll find that they become a second, personalized *Narrator's Toolkit*, just for your series. And they'll help you remember the name of that Andorian gangster in eight months when you want to bring him back for the sequel.

UNDERSTAND THE ESSENCE OF GAMEPLAY

The essence of gameplay is *meaningful choice*. Whenever something in your game feels like it's not working, or whenever you want something to work *better*, keep it in mind. Every kind of game, from tic-tac-toe to chess to *Monopoly* to the *Star Trek RPG*, is entertaining because it provides a forum for the players to make choices, and for those choices to determine the game's outcome. In a role-playing game, there is no "victory condition" for the players apart from mutual entertainment, but the characters must still strive to succeed, and their success should depend on the choices made by the players.

If your game seems unsatisfying in some way, try examining it in light of this. Are there important NPCs making choices that the players would enjoy making? Find a way to put that responsibility onto the Crew! Are there more ways that the players can be presented with choices? Think of personal choices, career choices, moral and ethi-



cal dilemmas, puzzles, military tactical choices, even aesthetic choices. Choices can be included simply as a character detail, to add atmosphere, which over time can be very meaningful indeed. What do they order from the food synthesizer? What should the name of the new shuttlecraft be?

In brief: Never hesitate to knock a higher-grade NPC officer into a coma if it means putting more choices into the hands of the Crew.

DON'T LET UNREALISTIC EXPECTATIONS RUIN THE FUN

This is a big one. When reading through a book like this, you might get the mistaken idea that there are Narrators out there that know all the tricks and turns, who do everything right. And naturally, they have players who are attentive and serious about the game, but at the same time fun and adventurous and tolerant and stunningly in-character whenever it's appropriate. *Yeah, right.* And the pizza is both fat-free and delicious. Not in *this* universe.

We old-timers goof up just as often as you, most likely. Gaming at a more "expert" level just means that your mistakes take on more variety—because great Narrators are always experimenting and trying something interesting. That means even *more* ways to mess up, to make the game drag, to give the players an excuse to start quoting movies, reaching for comic books and bouncing their dice in distraction.

Please, don't take it personally when your players get distracted and spend so much time shooting the breeze and making jokes that it's difficult to get started. Gamers

are *like* that. And they get even more like it as they get older, because work and relationships and all the other interesting distractions that life provides means that, more and more, the only time we see each other is when the game actually happens, and that means a little time to play "catch-up" is essential.

Your players are only human. They're there to entertain you, so relax and enjoy it. You're there to entertain them, so relax and enjoy that, too. Don't get too hung up on your vision of an ideal gaming session; just work to make your game the best it can be.

Eight Design Techniques

Plotting an episode is "easy:" All you need is a goal for the characters (Task), a reason for them to pursue the goal (Motive), a method for doing so (Action), and something that gets in their way (Conflict). Throw it in a pot, stir, bring to a boil (Climax) and serve (from Teaser to Resolution). *Voilà.*

But of course, it isn't *really* easy, at least not always. While most of us have our own usual methods of devising episodes for our players to enjoy, most of us also have "dry spells" where either we can't seem to come up with anything, or (perhaps worse) anything that feels significantly different from things we've already done to death!

This section is dedicated to easing the harried Narrator through those troubled times, by exploring a variety of approaches to episode-writing and its essential forebear, idea-generation:

Some Fundamental Star Trek Stories point up a good way to get in the mood for making your episode come together. A quick look at a few time-honored classic traditions of *Star Trek*.

Locale Sourcing is about making stories "from the ground up"—letting the setting determine the story. Build it, and they will come.

The Round Table is an exercise in internal role-playing particularly suited to long-term series-style play. What if your NPCs could write the story?

The Custom Climax is a top-down method where a single scene of triumphant teamwork unfolds in reverse to make your story.

Routine Destruction turns a mundane activity into a series of potential conflicts. Add motive and stir.

A Comedy of Errors is a method of plot-building that works as well for drama as comedy: Pinpoint the risks of responsibility, the pitfalls of research, the possibilities of mistaken identity, and exploit them.

Shameless Borrowing is theft, pure and simple. But the goal isn't just to adapt a story, the goal is to adapt a story that has no business being adapted.

Element Lists can turn a brain full of disassociated images into a mind ready to create a masterful episode.

These methods range over a variety of styles—some are methodical and approach episode-writing as a craft; some others are a little more outré and designed to stimulate your imagination in unusual ways. When you find yourself stuck for fresh ideas for your series, pick a method that differs a good deal from how you usually do it. And if one method doesn't work, move on to the next. Very often, the terrific episode inside our heads just needs a bit of prodding before it leaps out onto paper—so as long as you're prodding, you might as well have some variety to keep from getting bored. The essential point to remember: Relax. Anxiety and self-doubt is what causes most kinds of "Narrator's Block," and often the best solution to a creative bottleneck is to take a break and get out of the house for a while.

In the meantime, the methods described here will also provide you with some good ideas when you aren't blocked, so enjoy!

SOME FUNDAMENTAL *STAR TREK* STORIES

One of the most basic methods for generating an episode idea is to simply borrow one from *Star Trek* tradition. Like the axioms and themes discussed in the *Star Trek*



Roleplaying Game core rulebook, these "classic" *Star Trek* plots can not only provide inspiration when the well runs dry, they can also help maintain a solid connection between the style of your game and the proper "feel" of *Star Trek*. Use this section in conjunction with the rulebook: Pick one of the story types described below, pick a theme from the *Star Trek RPG*, and then imagine some of the ways you can apply the axioms to that particular combination.

Many of these concepts can take the shape of "MacGuffins," objects or devices to get the plot moving. What the MacGuffin is doesn't matter nearly as much as how the characters react to it, and how the villains fight over it. MacGuffins have a long and honorable history: the term was coined by Alfred Hitchcock, after all. Don't be embarrassed to use them.

On a similar note, some Narrators, concerned that their games will seem too trite, clichéd or formulaic, avoid "fundamental" *Star Trek* stories entirely. Don't let concerns like that limit you! An idea that seems "done to death" on paper isn't like that at all when your players meet it head-on and *experience* it. The thrill of danger, the parry and riposte of the conflict, and the exhilaration of triumph always manage to feel fresh and different—because they *are*.

While it's probably a mistake to (for example) base two *consecutive* episodes around a transporter malfunction, there's no harm in all in employing that particular plot device on occasion. Quite the contrary: it will make your *Star Trek* feel much more like the *Star Trek* your players are hoping for.

This list is just a sampling of concepts that feel “right” in *Star Trek*—four broad story-concepts that any Narrator might find useful. With each one, we explore the basic “foundation” story, and some of the variations that are possible, and how each variation tends to shape an episode.

THE DERELICT

Drifting in the icy depths between the stars is a ship. Its engines are dead; the fate of its crew is unknown. The sensors are reading something unusual, however . . . an unexpected sign of life? An inexplicable energy-pulse? A subspace beacon?

A derelict episode is a “ship-based” story in which the Crew discover a wrecked starship or an abandoned (or unexpectedly lifeless) space station or outpost. Derelict stories are mystery stories, and the mystery sometimes begins with the very existence (or location) of the derelict: Maybe it was believed disintegrated years ago. Maybe it was believed lost—but thousands of light years away, in a completely different sector of space. Maybe it looks like a Federation ship, but it bears markings and numbers that no known Federation ship should bear. Maybe it’s an alien ship, it’s configuration and origins entirely unfamiliar.

Of course, after the initial sensor-sweep, the Crew should be tempted to explore the “ruin” they’ve discovered. The possibilities are many, and include:

The derelict is infested in some way—with dangerous vermin, with a never-before-encountered virus, with alien energies—and the infestation threatens to do to

the Crew’s vessel what it has already done to the derelict. In this, as in many of the derelict episodes, the existence of the derelict is really a warning: Unless the Crew is somehow cleverer than their predecessors, they will suffer the same fate.

The derelict is a decoy—Not a silent metallic tomb at all, the derelict has been deliberately placed where it could be spotted, in order to lure the Crew into a trap. The initial team beamed over to investigate might be the first victims, or they might be the ship’s only hope for survival. (Usually that depends on whether the first team is the Crew or a batch of redshirts.) An interesting variation on this theme: the trap was designed for somebody else—maybe somebody long-dead—not unlike a stray mine from a forgotten war.

The derelict was destroyed in battle—This can mean a lot of things. If the battle happened recently, it can mean that the enemy is still at hand, maybe hovering just outside of sensor range, or maybe speeding on to the next logical target: an innocent Federation world, or some other target that must be protected immediately. A battle-destroyed derelict can also be the telltale sign of treachery: the weapons used on the ship are shown by the sensors to be identical to those used by the local aliens, but that would mean they’ve violated their peace treaty! Is a war threatening, or is some third party trying to engineer blackmail? Or maybe the weapons used were clearly Klingon disruptor-beams . . . but there shouldn’t be any Klingons this deep into the Alpha Quadrant, so far from the neutral zone!

The derelict is lost in time or space—According to the records on board the derelict, the ship was destroyed . . . fifty years from now? Or maybe it’s a vessel that was lost a long time in the past—and yet there’s still life-readings appearing on the sensors. It could be an example of reaping what’s been sown (see below).

The derelict is inhabited—Sometimes by the original occupants, sometimes by entirely new occupants. Sometimes by entirely new occupants posing as the



original occupants. Sometimes by the original occupants, so seriously altered by something alien that they're effectively new occupants. In any of these cases, the two questions that loom large are "Are they here voluntarily?" and "Are they innocent, or aggressive bad-guy types?" If they're not a threat in any way, and they're not stranded, then it usually means that something dangerous is nearby, instead.

While the derelict is typically a vehicle or station in space, it can also apply to a planetside facility of some kind, usually an isolated science station, military "listening post," or even a ruined ancient city. "The Naked Time" was really a derelict episode, with the "derelict" being the station on Psi 2000, infested with the strange virus that nearly destroyed the *Enterprise* by driving her crew mad.

A related concept might be called the "Mysterious Thing" plot, where the ship picks up something other than a derelict on the sensors, and must learn to understand and deal with it to succeed: A mysterious spinning cube, an unusual energy field, an strange gateway or wormhole.

THE DISTRESS SIGNAL

After weeks of routine star-mapping in the Vanaris Sector, the Crew have decided that there's nothing to do for now but to accept that they drew the short straw when it came to glamorous assignments. Then, a faint signal is detected by the communications officer . . . The image is blurry, and breaks up frequently, but it's obvious from the sounds of explosions, and rising flames, that whoever sent it needs help. Now.

The *Star Trek* RPG is a heroic roleplaying game—it's not about killing things to steal their treasure or drowning in self-pity and industrial music as a tragic undead. *Star Trek* is about heroes, and heroes, frequently, find themselves answering cries for help. Very often, disaster strikes in the *Star Trek* universe—and just as often, there's no one to hear.

Space is big, and if the Crew picks up a distress signal, it's usually wise to assume that they have the only ship within range able to help, and the rescue begins. Of course, distress-signal episodes are sometimes tales of

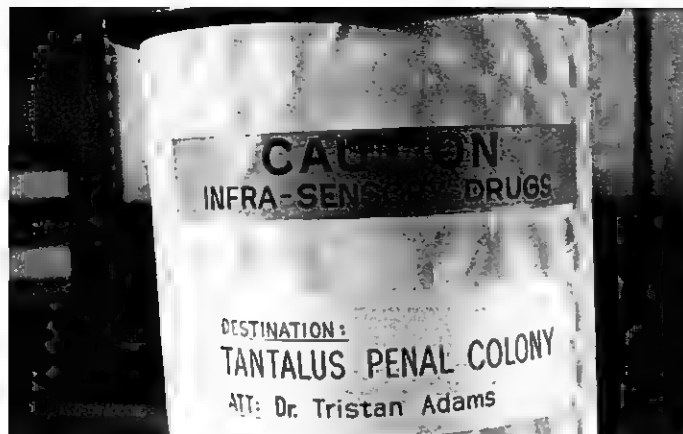


treachery; the call for help is a fake. Usually, though, there really is somebody at the other end that needs assistance. Among the many possibilities:

The senders are already dead—Sometimes, the distress signal is too late. The Crew arrives on the scene to find that the disaster is long since over. In this case, the plot centers on what's left behind: Maybe the villains responsible are still at large, or maybe a natural disaster has caused something strange and dangerous to be released from a millenias-old hiding place. Sometimes, the signal comes by radio, instead of subspace transmission, and then it's a fair bet that following it to its source will be a history lesson, and not current events.

The senders are an entire culture—First contact can sometimes be initiated by a distress signal, but it's rarely a happy occasion. In "Miri", a distress signal introduces the *Enterprise* to a planet of children. Sometimes, the troubles of an entire world or nation create a sticky dilemma for the Crew, thanks to the Federation policies about "interfering" with underdeveloped worlds.

The senders are in hiding—This one is good for role-playing possibilities. The origin of the distress signal is a planet or ship that is experiencing no particular distress at all, from its own perspective—the Crew arrives to find bustling cities, sunny skies, and no real trouble. But the distress signal puts the lie to the peaceful exterior, because hiding somewhere behind the façade are the



people who asked for help. Often, finding them to help them means cutting through a layer of lies or other smokescreens put up by the local populace. A good episode-type for players who like interacting directly with interesting cultures.

The senders are embroiled in conflict—This sometimes means the call is from other members of the Federation (as in “The Trouble With Tribbles”), who find themselves in a fix and want a ship to come to their aid. In “Tribbles” the distress call was an unjustified abuse of the “Priority One” distress signal, but it’s a good thing for all involved that the Enterprise was there! Sometimes, the call originates from a genuine war, and the episode becomes centered on the tricky choices involved when the Crew realizes that both sides might be worth helping. Do they help those who asked for aid? Do they help the other side? Is there some way to mediate and end the conflict entirely? And sometimes, both combatants are obviously evil—and whoever wins will become trouble for the Federation. Time to act!

The senders aren’t happy to see the Crew arrive—If the distress signal was sent with an entirely different “rescuer” in mind, the locals might not be too grateful when the Crew arrives. Some worlds resent Federation intrusion, even when the Federation does their best to do what’s right for everybody it encounters. Often, an episode like this is an opportunity for a new ally to be made, or an old wound to be healed. But what of the

intended recipient of the signal? Sometimes, that’s exactly who really needs rescuing.

The cry for help is a very elementary MacGuffin—but because it emphasizes the heroic nature of *Star Trek*, it’s difficult to overuse. As clichés go, it’s profoundly useful for getting the sense of action injected quickly into an episode, and it’s often worth it to add it, retroactively, to any plot that you originally conceived as an assigned mission. Rather than Starfleet summoning the Crew and briefing them on the trouble with the Orion pirates, have the Crew traveling near the trouble-spot and receive a distress call from a trading-vessel under attack! It gets them there faster, and gets the blood of your players pumping right away, and that makes for a better game.

A related episode concept worth exploring is “The Hot Spot”—whether by “distress call” or by emergency order from Starfleet, the ship is ordered to a point of sudden trouble of some kind. Popular candidates include the Klingon and Romulan Neutral Zones, or a “prison planet” of some kind, or a suspected pirate hideout. The possibilities form along the same lines as the distress call scenario; the difference is that the episode is more likely to be military in nature, less likely to include mystery elements, and the setting is often one that is already known to the Crew.

REAPING WHAT’S BEEN SOWN

After three hundred years, there it was, sitting in a peaceful valley on a forested world that the Earth men who built it never dreamed existed. And after three hundred years, it had grown a lot . . . worshipped by aliens, tossed through wormholes, the cause of four wars. The chrome shone bright as it did in the showroom, and the cigarette lighter still worked. Even now, it was being used to light the ceremonial fire that would burn the bothersome Federation officers to cinders.

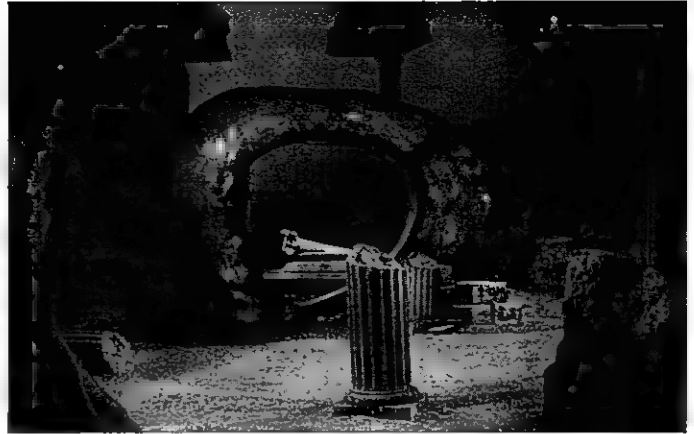
The “reaping” episode is about finishing what’s been started, sometimes centuries ago! Kirk and crew had their share of this . . . from Khan on the *Botany Bay* to Khan on Ceti Alpha V; from Nomad to V’ger; from the gangster-society of “A Piece of the Action” to the Nazi society of “Patterns of Force,” the crew of the *Enterprise* spent a lot

of time reaping what had been sown. But that still leaves plenty of reaping for *your* Crew, and it can be a fascinating exercise for both Narrator and players. Some things to reap include:

Forgotten voyages: Sometimes, ships that went into space long ago are already waiting to be explored as derelicts (see above), but not always. Some, like the *Botany Bay*, are some form of “sleeper” ship, designed for long voyages by keeping captain and crew in suspended animation—and some crews are simply very long-lived, either naturally or thanks to previous contact with strange alien forces. Maybe they’ve returned, now, with what they’ve learned from the aliens, which might be good, but is more likely sinister. Stories where the Crew encounters long-forgotten voyagers are fun to roleplay, since the inevitable teaching-the-NPCs-about-how-much-society-has-changed scenes are good excuses to reveal personalities.

Forgotten signals: Touched on briefly above, this is a convention that lots of science fiction writers have enjoyed exploring over the years. Prior to the invention of subspace transmissions, communication between worlds was possible only by physically carrying a message at warp speed (warp drive was invented some time before subspace radio), or by conventional radio, which travels only at the speed of light. The *Star Trek* TV episode “A Piece of the Action” took advantage of this; the news of loss of the *U.S.S. Horizon* took 100 years to reach the Federation, and in that time, the world of Sigma Iotia II was dramatically changed (making the episode an example of both “forgotten signals” and “forgotten souvenirs”). Such transmissions can be “living” pieces of history—eerie clues that lead to dramatic revelations.

Forgotten beings: The history of the *Star Trek* universe is consistently clear on one point: Earth (and presumably many other worlds) has been visited throughout its history by beings remembered now as gods, or mythological beasts, or demons, or even, mistakenly, as human beings (or as the motives of human beings,



such as the entity in “Wolf in the Fold”). Many of them still wander the stars, or dwell on distant worlds, wanting to be worshipped again, or feared again, or wanting to kill again. When they’re encountered, they often “have the advantage” of Earthmen—remembering intimately their past with humans, which sometimes includes slights, real or imagined, or grudges long held. Sometimes, they get the urge to take it out on today’s humans, and on that hangs a tale.

Forgotten souvenirs: Leave behind a book about Chicago mobs of the 1920s, and, as we know, it can have dangerous repercussions . . . This theme has many wrinkles waiting to be explored, and it’s one of the reasons the Prime Directive exists. The Iotians of “A Piece of the Action” are a highly imitative species, so their example is extreme, but any species with access to a tricorder, for instance, or a hand-phaser, or even a book of philosophy or poetry, could be profoundly altered by it, and in the early years of the Federation, there was no Prime Directive. There may be many worlds, still uncontacted, that were tainted in some way by “souvenirs” of Starfleet visits, or even by chance contact with our space probes—or our television signals. Episodes dealing with such worlds will often be about discovering ways to undo the damage.

Episodes like this have the advantage of bringing history, in some form, to the forefront, and every time you do that, you reinforce the idea of *Star Trek* as a consistent story of mankind leading up to the 23rd century. Since



"reaping" stories are about the consequences of actions, often careless and shortsighted ones, they are also a powerful vehicle for exploring the many social and personal themes that *Star Trek* is known for. This makes them a great playground to occasionally visit, and no Narrator should overlook the potential, here.

An important variation to keep in mind with all of these concepts is that not everything "sown" is sown by humankind, and these "blasts from the past" needn't be from a *familiar* past. What if the Crew were to meet a ship thought long lost in the mists of *Vulcan* legend? What happens if a careless Romulan left behind some token souvenirs from his voyages, and there's now an entire world of humanlike aliens who are doing their best to recreate a specific period of early Romulan history? This variant on the "reaping" theme can be fun to play, although the Narrator must keep in mind that the familiarity of human history is what makes "traditional" reaping episodes so easy to run. This means that reaping the past of other races requires more in the way of exposition and "mouthpiece" NPCs, so strike a balance to keep such episodes from being slow.

THE PASSENGER

After three centuries of war, the inhabitants of Gochoran IV and Lestiliis Prime have decided that it's worth their economic while to patch up their differences. Because, if they do, then they can be considered for membership in the Federation, which both worlds want desperately to help keep from falling back into balkanized

chaos and resulting ruin. Your ship has been given the signal honor of bringing the ambassadors of both worlds to Earth, where a summit will be hosted . . . Can they survive the trip without gutting one another with their ceremonial cutlasses?

The passenger episode presents a ship-based scenario: The Crew are responsible for the transport, safety and comfort of somebody important, or interesting, or simply dangerous. The passenger is always, in some way, troublesome. Sometimes, the conflicts of the episode arise from the passenger being trouble directly—trying to take over the ship, or steal a shuttlecraft to escape, or cause some kind of damage to ship's systems or crew morale. Other times, the conflict is from outside—the passenger must be protected in some way, either from attack or personal influence of some kind. A third option is ideal for some very mature roleplaying opportunities, where the passenger is personally troubled, or hesitant to perform the vital task that they're being ferried toward, and the Crew must somehow bring about a change of heart for the good of everybody concerned. The many possibilities include:

The passenger is a criminal—Or, indeed, any other kind of prisoner or unsavory company. Rather than being given the red carpet treatment and a free run of the ship, the "passenger" is held by Security for the duration of the journey, or is confined to quarters, or is at least eyed suspiciously and expected to sit still. Sometimes, the prisoner is assigned to the ship: Starfleet wants the person taken someplace. Sometimes, the ship picks up the prisoner in the course of other duties (as with Harry Mudd in "Mudd's Women"). Generally, the episode structure is straightforward: the passenger exceeds the boundaries set for them, and causes trouble. Very often, the ship has other duties that are in progress, endangered by the passenger's activities, and the rascal must be brought to order before more damage or embarrassment results.

The passenger is a strange alien—In this version of the episode, learning to deal with the special needs or dangers the passenger introduces is often at the heart

of the conflicts. Some aliens are, without meaning to be, very hazardous (such as the Medusan ambassador Kollos in “Is There In Truth No Beauty?”), and simply having them on board is risky. Some aliens have special needs or problems that aren’t fully understood by Starfleet, which can crop up when the ship carrying them is deep in space, forcing the Crew to improvise or otherwise manage an ingenious solution. Some aliens are just touchy—ordinary dialogue can include subtle but unforgivable insults, and careful protocols must be observed.

The passenger is a bigshot and knows it—Sometimes, these passengers are more irritating to a well-meaning Crew than a dozen combined Harry Mudds. This can simply be a pompous ambassador or planetary ruler of some kind, making demands, complaining about the food and then suddenly needing to be rescued from trouble of his own devising. It can also be a dangerous person, one with a dark past known to the Crew, but being treated well because they’ve managed to clean their slate, or because they have something that the Federation or somebody else important wants. Such galling passengers must, in the end, “get theirs,” or your players might never forgive you. But until that point, they can be quite a challenge.

The passenger is dangerous and doesn’t know it—There’s no better way to hide danger than with genuine innocence. Maybe the passenger is hiding an alien parasite that the passenger thinks is a harmless friend—but while he sleeps, the parasite goes out and kills, and all clues point to the visitor’s cabin. Maybe the passenger is mentally unbalanced, or carrying a horrible illness, or is a telepathic alien who causes unexpected and potentially deadly headaches in some psi-sensitive races. This kind of episode often presents a unique challenge where the Crew must “defeat” the passenger while at the same time rescuing him.

The passenger has a secret agenda—Sometimes, the agenda that the Crew is aware of is a fake. Sometimes, it’s not a fake, but the passenger is up to something

extra, something he needs the ship or it’s crew for. This easily combines with just about any other possibility. The passenger might, for instance, be a “criminal” confined to his quarters because that was the simplest way for him to get on board the ship and hitch passage to where he needs to go. When the Crew finds out that he’s broken free in order to do something noble, they might even empathize, depending on how convinced they are that he’s a bad guy. Of course, if they find that he’s broken free to do something evil, then that means the Crew have been taken for patsies, so it’s a good idea, again, to let them “get him good” in the end.

There are lots of passengers—Sometimes a ship will be called upon to transport large groups of people, dozens or more. Usually, these people aren’t heading toward something important that they must achieve. Rather, they’re leaving someplace that isn’t hospitable anymore, as refugees, or survivors of some calamity. They must be taken someplace where they can begin their lives anew. Typically, this kind of episode draws its conflict from the damage this does to the routine of a ship not designed to carry large numbers of passengers—children getting into trouble by sneaking into the Jefferies tubes, restless people wandering onto the bridge in times of crisis, and so on. There is usually a larger conflict present at some point, which the refugees complicate and (perhaps) ultimately help resolve.

Just about every episode of this sort is rich in opportunities for character-revealing dialogue. Passenger episodes also typically explore a curious truth of the *Star Trek* uni-



verse: A starship is *home*, and a starship crew tends to become very accustomed to a certain way of life. The Passenger, even a well meaning one, is often like a relative who comes to spend a month, disrupting everybody's comfort just a little bit.

A related plot concept is the "Special Cargo" episode, where, instead of an interesting person or group, the ship is charged with the transport of an important and/or dangerous substance or object—a new technology, being taken to a remote shipyard where it will be installed in a prototype; a supply of medicine or food for a colony hit by disaster; a cargo-hold full of "chocolate and nylons" or "beads and trinkets" to placate the leaders of a world strategically important to the Federation. The conflicts in such an episode are more likely to involve external attackers or thieves, but often the cargo is sufficiently dangerous to be the episode's "villain" all by itself.

LOCALE SOURCING

The very first roleplaying adventures were *location-based*—maps of detailed locations filled with a variety of challenges. The mode of play was typically exploratory—the players mentally explored the hidden map, and the plot just sort of built itself haphazardly (if at all).

For the *Star Trek RPG* to feel like *Star Trek* at all, though, there needs to be a real plot underlying your episode (see pg. 259 of the *Star Trek Roleplaying Game* core rulebook for a discussion of the basic three-act structure we use for all the episodes we write). That said, designing an interesting locale can still form a powerful foundation for a *Star Trek* plot: "Strange New Worlds" are



at the heart of things, after all! You will find that the steps necessary to design a fascinating place can leverage plot ideas you didn't know you had right out of the raw ore of your imagination.

The method is simple: Start with a blank piece of paper (or a blank document in your word processor of choice), and describe a place in 50 words or so. Keep it simple and rapid. Don't bother to think too deeply about it; this is another example of raw brainstorming:

Equila: It used to be a lush and untamed world, overgrown with green and filled with mists. A race called the Bahn Vorth got hold of it 160 years ago, and now it's a mudhole used for waste-dumping and slave-markets. It's outside of Federation space, and the Bahn Vorth are a recent discovery.

There. It takes maybe 20 seconds. Once you have this "thumbnail" of your place, it's a matter of applying a few basic questions. The answers to these questions will provide a set of potential motivations that you can build plots on:

- *What does the place have in it that would interest the Federation?*
- *What does the place have in it that would personally interest the Crew?*
- *What does the place have in it that would directly involve the mission of the Crew's vessel?*
- *Who lives or works there that the Crew would admire and respect?*
- *Who lives or works there that the Crew would desperately want to punch very very hard in the face?*
- *Who or what aboard the Crew's own vessel would be of interest to important people in the place?*

Now, open your mind's eye (and your mind's ear, nose, and fingers, come to that) and explore your new

place with these questions in mind. Invent answers! Revel in the power of the Narrator as you create and dispel entire civilizations at your whim. Take a moment, if you like, to cackle.

It's not necessary to provide answers for all six questions; three or four will usually suffice. If you have the time to play, however, flesh out each and every one in as much detail as you can (providing several alternates is even better). The reason, simply, is that it's better to have extra detail and not need it than to need detail and not have it. Less is more, sure, but you can always recycle the leftovers in episodes to come.

Try for a blend of the nasty and nice; try to include the second or fourth question every time. Let's continue to develop our example a little and see where the chips fall:

- *We decide that the Federation is interested in the slave trade, especially, since reports have come in that the slaves include Humans and Tellarites kidnapped by ships recently identified as Bahn Vorth corsairs. These people had been thought lost in space, but now it looks like some of the Bahn Vorthi are cutthroat pirates.*
- *We want one "personal hook" for each of our three players' characters, so: Many of the Bahn Vorthi are pleasant, artistic and passionate people—the nasty pirates, as it turns out, are simply the most powerful and visible portion of Vorth society. The lusty female Bahn Vorth scout pilots will appeal to the romantic-subplot-hounding ship's surgeon. The Equilan tukuru flowers will appeal to the artistically-inclined Vulcan communications officer (they are used to produce an iridescent dye unlike any ever seen). Finally, we suspect that our swashbuckling Security chief will be fascinated with the amazing native Bahn Vorth martial-art style.*
- *The crew are on an exploratory mission, and this world is in newly-explored and never-properly-charted territory, so that one's simple enough.*



- *The Bahn Vorth factions who don't like the nasty pirate portion of their society are led by an elderly Bahn Vorth, a real cultured gentleman who has visions of bringing his people together into a really nice civilization that won't mess up any more worlds (as it turns out, we've suddenly decided that the Bahn Vorth homeworld is dead, and that they moved here when they needed a new planet to wreck). We name the old guy Yuvar, and decide that he'll be very likeable, a wise-old-grandfather type, but with regal bearing and plenty of energy.*
- *The Bahn Vorthi in power, the nasty pirates, are the leftovers of the old homeworld's military dictatorship. They managed to save the species from extinction and all, but in the intervening years they've devolved into real losers, and fortunately now lack any strong central leadership. One particularly charismatic (also sadistic) "chief" among them, though, is Ilgeshra the Ugly, a Machiavellian nightmare who's very good at pretending to be a philanthropist and concerned citizen when he's talking to people from the Federation.*
- *And finally, another easy one: All that tempting Federation Technology. The Bahn Vorthi have really cool plasma weapons, but aside from that are about a century behind the Federation when it comes to state-of-the-art technology.*

This stage, again, is raw brainstorming. Lots of it will probably change now that we have enough to start building on—and at this point, a few plots have begun to present themselves. What we have is a culture that wants to redeem itself, filled with elements that are making that difficult.

Even if the nice *Bahn Vorthi* manage to take power from the military faction, the rest of the local galactic citizens will likely stigmatize them for a long time to come, based on past problems. Meantime, the Crew have lusty scout pilots to meet, exotic flowers to find, and a world at a serious crossroads to help save. From here, pinpointing where a story can begin and end is easy.

Scaling: Note that the “default” new place for *Star Trek* is the planet, but inventing a new sector, or a new space station, or even just a new city will provide the same kind of “core” that the rest of your episode can be built on. Each “scale” comes complete with a unique set of advantages that the Narrator can exploit.

Thing-Sourcing, People-Sourcing: The principles of Locale Sourcing can be applied to other kinds of “starting points” as well: technological gizmos, alien races, animals, stellar phenomena, and more. The core idea remains the same: Create a new and interesting element of the *Star Trek* universe, define it as fully as possible, and then explore the stories that suggest themselves. The basic list of questions that you apply to each new creation remains largely the same: the idea is to find out how this new element will interest your Crew, the Federation, and other people that come in

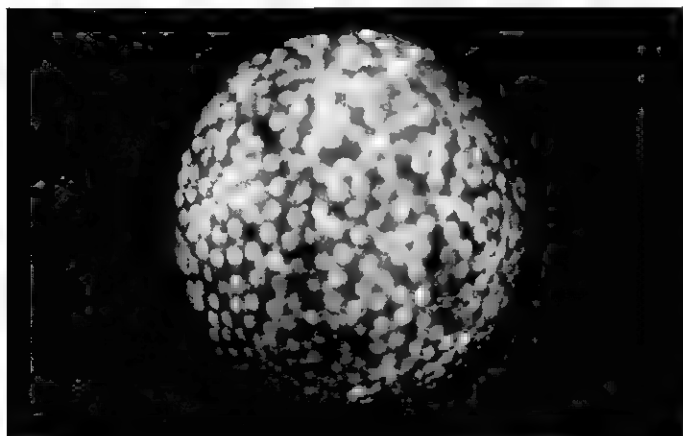
contact with it. Once you understand that, you’ll understand how it affects motive—and then you’ll have a story worth telling.

THE ROUND TABLE

This method of idea-generation and episode design works best in an ongoing series, where the Narrator has already established a supporting cast of NPCs that he and the players enjoy interacting with. It can also be used to “round out” and improve the rough outline for an episode that you feel needs a little work before you call it done. The Round table is a mental exercise in which the game’s NPCs get together *tell the Narrator how the story should go*. Weird? Certainly. It’s downright *flaky*, really, but it works, and (since it all takes place in your imagination, anyway) nobody needs to know about it. Nobody *real*, anyway.

Begin by picturing the Round Table itself. Our choice of metaphor is Arthurian, of course, but it’s probably best to imagine yourself in one of the briefing rooms onboard a Federation starship—complete with triangular vid-monitors, pale blue walls, and swiveling chairs. Now, in walk your NPCs—all of the ones that you find really interesting, from the cagiest Klingon commander to the most amusing space merchant. Let them all sit down, and give them a look: Think of them as actors, now. Each one, naturally, wants more screen time. Each one wants to be a pivotal part of the story in some way. Each one wants to show off what he can do. Maybe a few even have complaints about how foolish you made them look in the last episode, or how they never seem to do anything apart from providing a bit of exposition and then walking “offscreen.” In your mind, let each one come alive as an individual at the center of their own universe—let them critique your story ideas from *their* perspective.

Create an internal dialogue where each NPC answers the question: “Why should I give you more time in the episode? What have you got to offer?” Then, it’s your responsibility to come up with a good answer! Go through each one, then let them argue it out, if you want—make it a good session of daydreaming, and keep notes. Some other questions worth asking:



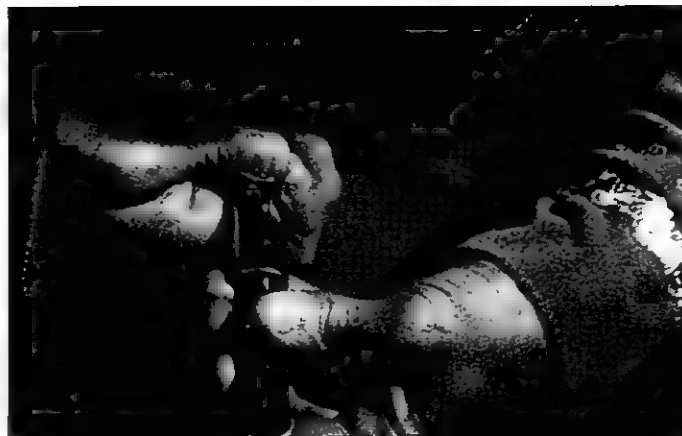
- *If you were in the Crew's position when [insert dramatic conflict] took place, how would you handle it differently than the Crew?*
- *Have you ever killed anyone? How did that feel?*
- *What do you most want in life? How do you plan to achieve it? How far would you go, and what resources would you use?*
- *Do you know anybody else that should appear in the story that isn't here at the Round Table with us? A friend, maybe? An informant? A co-worker?*

The benefits of occasionally applying this exercise to your series design are many: It can result in smarter, more worthy villains, and "minor characters" that gain dimension and importance in ways that your players won't expect. Perhaps more important, it can give any Narrator a greater, more personal grasp of both the episode and the supporting cast that populates it, and that can mean increased confidence when running the game—even if the details you "discover" at the Round Table end up serving no real, direct function in the plot.

It can also be used to create entire stories from the ground up. By "externalizing" our desire to create a story and putting the responsibility for one on the shoulders of our fictional characters, we can let our imaginations wander in different directions than might normally be our habit. After all, a Klingon would write a different sort of episode than we would, especially if he's writing himself as the lead villain. And maybe his episode is worth playing!

Many Narrators who use this technique find themselves returning to it in brief flashes when they feel stuck. Need advice on how to improve a scene or spice up your ending? Ask an NPC . . .

The Round Table exercise isn't just a way to feel silly; it's grounded in a vital principle that all good writers work with: Stories are better if the writer understands the perspective of the characters in them. By beginning with your NPCs and understanding what they want and what they're willing to do to get it, you can construct the foundation for a plot that will engage and entertain your Crew in new ways.



THE CUSTOM CLIMAX

For most Narrators (and most screenwriters, come to that), the third act is the most difficult to write, because it includes the most vital scene: the climax. The ideal climax is not only exciting, it must be clear and decisive, build logically from the action that precedes it, be surprising or enlightening in some way, and feel *right*. When the dust settles, the climax should feel as though, ultimately, things *had* to go that way—the climax should deliver what the rest of the episode promises, and if it doesn't, the episode isn't satisfying.

That's a lot of pressure to put on a scene! Compared to the climax, everything else can seem easy.

The solution to this problem lies in one of the best all-around approaches to episode design: Creating your climax very early in the design process, and writing Act One and Act Two well *after* the fundamentals of Act Three have been written. By beginning with your ending and working backward, you can be sure that the story's action is building logically and steadily toward an exciting conclusion. The particular method we'll explore in this section is building your climax out of the details of your Crew's interests, abilities and weaknesses, to insure an episode that is not only engaging, but also custom-tailored to your Crew.

To use this method, you'll need a thumbnail "premise" for your episode (see pg. 255 of the *Star Trek Roleplaying Game* core rulebook), either rapidly brainstormed or created using one of the idea-generating techniques in this book. You'll also need a completed Crew, preferably one that has seen a little bit of play before.



Once you have a good idea of your premise, begin by examining individual members of the Crew (having copies of the players' character sheets handy will help a good deal), making notes on each one. Using both the material on the character sheets and your memories of what the characters have done in play, make notes on each of these points:

- *What skills (and/or specializations) does this character have that haven't come into play for a long time (or at all)?*
- *What single ability most defines this character as a person?*
- *What single ability most defines this character as an officer? (If the character isn't a Starfleet officer, substitute "in his profession")*
- *What part of the character's background hasn't had a story role yet? (This includes obvious things like cadet tours and so on, as well as any other background detail the player has provided, in or out of play).*
- *Are there any ideals, morals, beliefs or principles that the character holds which haven't been really tested yet?*
- *What are the two things or ideas that the character seems to value most?*

Keep your answers brief; this exercise will provide you with a lot of data, and you won't need all of it. Of course, the parts you don't use will be readily at hand the next time you employ this technique.

By jotting these items down, you've created a smorgasbord of options for building personal conflicts that will draw your players directly into the action through the characters they've created. Go through each character's list of answers, and pick one or two from each that look like they might make an interesting story. Work back and forth between the characters to choose: if you can find strong elements some of the characters have in common, so much the better!

Set the lists aside for a moment. You'll need them soon, but for now let's get back to what makes a great climax:

A great climax is in some way surprising. You should plant the seeds in your design to let the Crew succeed in an unexpected way (or one of several). Ideally, this should be an invisible process—the Crew should be able to "discover" an innovative solution, and feel proud of themselves for it. This isn't always possible, but it's a goal worth shooting for, and worth deliberately including in your episode design.

A great climax evolves naturally from the action that preceded it. Seemingly a contradiction of the above, which is why Act Three is the toughest of the bunch. The climax should proceed naturally, even inevitably, from the buildup in Act Two, and be consistent with the tone and "feel" established in Act One.

And, again, the climax should be decisive and clear. To build our custom climax (and the action that will precede it), we must bring together the elements we have handy: our premise, our list of answers about the Crew, and the contradictions inherent in the "ideal" climax. This is a tricky process, so let's explore an example:

Beginnings: The Crew is small, consisting of a young ship's surgeon who fancies himself something of a romantic, a Vulcan communications officer known mostly for her artistic pursuits when off-duty, and an

action-loving Security chief. They serve together aboard a *Constitution*-class starship on first-contact and diplomatic missions. The Narrator has decided on a premise adapted from "The Enemy Within": The ship's captain will be split into an "evil" and "good" captain. Unlike the TV episode, though, the evil captain will take command instead of sneaking around belowdecks, and the good captain will be imprisoned and hidden—all while the ship is due to meet with a peaceful new world who might be able to supply the Federation with a new source of dilithium crystals. The evil captain wants to conquer the world for himself!

Crew Details: We make a list of answers for each character, and ideas begin to emerge. The ship's surgeon has had his fair share of romantic subplots and other obvious stuff, but he's never once had his Hippocratic Oath really put to the test, despite having quoted it as a "color" detail in the first episode the group played together. The Vulcan officer is essentially a peaceful character; he's never once had to engage in hand-to-hand combat in the game, nor has he used his phaser. The Security officer has expressed an interest in espionage, but hasn't yet had a chance to flex those particular roleplaying muscles yet. We find lots of other exploitable details, but decides to earmark these in particular to work with this time around.

Now, remember that the key is to develop the climax first. Not dwelling on the mid-story and buildup for now, we brainstorm a few possible climaxes:

Possibility One: The "evil" captain, having been wounded by a security "red-shirt" by his own arrogance, lies dying, and the "good" captain is still missing (the idea being that the evil captain has bragged about hiding the good one, but nobody has been able to find him yet). The crew must save the life of one captain while racing against the clock to get both together in the transporter room to be re-joined.

Possibility Two: The "good" captain has been found and freed, and again, the evil captain is mortally

wounded. The "good" captain, though, is ordering the Crew to let his "evil twin" die—he doesn't want to be re-joined, and sees this as an opportunity to be rid of the darker aspects of his personality forever! The crew suspects that either side will eventually die or go insane if they aren't re-joined, but they have no proof. They must make some decisions, and act for the greater good, and not necessarily according to the orders of their captain (who, to be fair, isn't himself at the moment).

Possibility Three: Looking over Possibility Two, the Narrator comes up with an third option: There was no transporter malfunction at all! The "evil" captain is an alien spy, impersonating the captain which he has imprisoned and rendered unconscious. However, incidental bits of evidence make it look like a transporter-split occurred, and the villain is taking advantage of it (in this episode, we can assume that the events of "The Enemy Within" are in the past and known to Starfleet). In the climax, the Crew are the only ones who have discovered the truth, and they must prevent the merging of the two "halves" of the captain, since they're really two different people, and the merger would kill them both!

Each option has merit, but the third one looks like the most fun. The ideal climax is surprising, after all—so pulling the rug on the players' expectations for a solution should be entertaining. For a large part of the story, they'll be expecting to rejoin the captain with the transporter—but they'll end up trying to stop everybody else from doing just that.



With that climax in mind, constructing the episode that leads up to it is relatively simple. We decide that the alien spy will have an unusual tattoo on his shoulder, and that this will be the tip-off to a member of the Crew that the “evil captain” is really an alien impostor. How will the tip-off work? By knowing what’s coming, it becomes easy: In the opening “teaser” scene, the Crew will have to subdue an alien prisoner who has that very same tattoo. It will be introduced as an apparent red herring, a detail meant to have the players scratching their heads and looking things up on the computer. But, before they can spend any real time researching the symbol, the meat of Act One kicks in, and the Crew will be busy dealing with a new, distracting, and apparently unrelated problem.

Not until the climax nears will the tattoo present itself again, and it will help our climax feel more solid, more logical. In the scuffle with the “evil captain,” his uniform is torn, and the tattoo becomes briefly visible as security drags him off to the transporter room to be joined with his “good side.” The Crew must hurry, and convince the medical staff that they haven’t gone mad . . . They may have to quickly revive the *real* captain and try to get him in a *really bad mood* to convince everyone that he’s already “whole!”

ROUTINE DESTRUCTION

Captain’s Log. Stardate 4421.6. It seemed like it would be a routine morning. The alien ambassador was to be flown by shuttlecraft back to the planet’s surface (his personal beliefs forbade the use of the transporter), where the accompanying officers would attend a brief ceremony, and then return. We’d then proceed at maximum warp to Deep Space Station K-3 to rendezvous with the Excalibur for a new diplomatic mission . . . But then everything went wrong.

This technique can be used for plot-building at any scale—for an entire episode, a single Act, or even a single scene. The basic idea is to jot down the steps of any easily defined routine, and to then create tension by adding conflict to one or more of the steps. This method is particularly good if you find your thoughts are jumbled and ideas are hard in coming—it’s a very organized

method that can help structure your creativity and get you in a state of mind where you’re enjoying the design process.

For example, a simple routine for picking up a lab sample for delivery between two starbases might look like this:

Step One: Travel to the first starbase.

Step Two: Beam a party into the starbase to meet with the science team.

Step Three: Take possession of the lab sample case.

Step Four: Beam back aboard the ship.

Step Five: Stow the sample case in the ship’s lab so it will be safe.

Step Six: Travel to the destination starbase.

Step Seven: Beam aboard and deliver the sample.

Now, all the Narrator needs to do is to go in and take a hammer to the routine! To interrupt *every* step would be a little extreme—fine for a comedic episode, but too silly for a serious one. Usually, two or three “broken” steps are all you need to form the bare bones of a plot. From there, you can flesh things out free-form, or switch to one of the other methods described in this book.

It’s often best to work *backward*. As we established in “The Custom Climax,” working back-to-front can help keep your sequence of events logical. As you consider possible “interruptions” to the routine, story ideas will present themselves. For example, some possibilities for Step Six:

- *The journey is difficult because whatever is in the sample pack has an agenda of its own; it infects both instruments and crew members in an attempt to steer the ship to a destination of its own choosing.*
- *The journey is interrupted by two alien warships, locked in a terrifying struggle. The two races are*

unfamiliar, but if they keep on their current course they will soon arrive in populated Federation space, with the potential loss of millions of lives. On the other hand, the sample must be delivered on time, since it's necessary to cure a plague ravaging a world near the destination starbase.

- *The journey itself is fine—but when the ship arrives at the destination starbase, it's missing! In its place is a large metallic cube, spinning rapidly and emanating waves of strange radiation that begin to wreak havoc with the ship's systems.*

The first two clearly establish the laboratory sample as something key to the plot. In the first, it's an antagonist all its own (although its real intentions may be benign). In the second, it represents a very serious choice, since lives are at stake no matter what happens. In the third, it might or might not have anything to do with the real story, which obviously involves the loss or transformation of an entire starbase. It may simply be a MacGuffin—an object that provides the initial focus and gets events moving.

And of course, there are many other possibilities, and seven steps at which they can be explored. Let's examine another routine, this one on a much smaller scale: a typical morning in the life of a Starfleet captain:

Step One: Wake up and get showered and dressed.

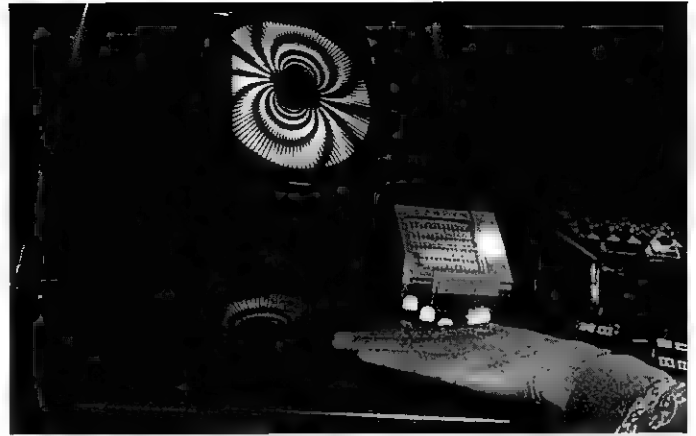
Step Two: Check computer for any messages received while sleeping.

Step Three: Leave quarters; visit Officer's Mess for breakfast.

Step Four: Ride the turbolift to the bridge

Step Five: Relieve the officer on deck and begin a fresh day of command.

An interesting plot (or at least the teaser for one) can be constructed by destroying this particular routine. Some possible changes or additions to each of the steps include:



Step One: A dangerous (probably poisonous) animal is in the bed, and must be neutralized. The captain wakes in the wrong quarters, and needs to figure out where he is (or, on a more subtle note, it's the right quarters, but with tiny details amiss).

Step Two: The computer is not responding, or is responding erratically. A message arrives containing a serious threat. A message arrives that makes no sense. The computer doesn't recognize the Captain as belonging in the captain's quarters, and alerts security.

Step Three: The door is secured, and must be either circumvented or destroyed. The door works, but now leads to a different corridor. Or perhaps the captain gets to the Officer's Mess just fine—but the replicators are malfunctioning dangerously (deadly acidic orange juice?).

Step Four: The turbolift won't open, or won't respond to commands properly, or takes the captain in the wrong direction—maybe it's taking everybody to the same deck for some reason. The turbolift stops mid-trip, trapping the captain in the lift (perhaps complete with a shipwide power-failure).

Step Five: The officer on deck doesn't want to be relieved—he wants to take command of the ship for himself, and his bridge shift have allied with him. The officer on deck is dead, killed by a gloating Klingon saboteur who has the bridge crew hostage.

There are dozens more possibilities for each step, and this example illustrates a point: The more mundane your “source” routine is, the more the tone will tend toward the paranoid and conspiratorial. After all, trouble carrying a valuable payload is almost to be expected, and is likely to come from proper, open-faced evil more often than not. Trouble with checking your mail in the morning, on the other hand, is more likely to be the result of some horrible secret lurking beneath the calm veneer of ordinary life, whether or not you’re the captain of a starship!

Our final example illustrates an equally important point: To keep your episodes refreshingly different, make a point now and then to step in at the least obvious points in a routine. Getting stuck in a turbolift is probably a little more obvious than experiencing trouble with the food replicator—so if you want something that feels a little different, get creative with just what kind of trouble a malfunctioning breakfast might mean. The answer is likely to be either sinister or silly, but it’s much more likely to be surprising, too. Another example of a routine with obvious “interruption points” is a planetbound trek of a tiny group of officers toward an isolated base in a hostile war-zone:

Step One: Move toward a position where tricorder readings can assist with recon.

Step Two: Take readings, get as much info as possible without endangering the group.

Step Three: Cross stealthily using the safest route possible. Any resistance should be entirely pacified to keep from giving away the existence of the party to others.

Step Four: Locate the besieged base and get inside safely.

While it’s a bit more “military” than most *Star Trek* episodes, an interesting story can be made by providing the obvious problems: enemy troops on patrol, enemy traps in the field, and more enemy troops surrounding the isolated base. But a more *interesting* episode can be made by putting problems in more unexpected stages of the established routine: What if the tricorder works a little too



well—revealing entire bodies of troops that don’t seem to be there at all in reality? Further investigation reveals that there is a secret war being waged under the front of the “real” one—aliens slightly out of phase with our dimension, occupying (and, in subtle ways, influencing) the battlefields that are visible to the naked eye.

Maybe the goal expands at this point: Not only must the Crew make their way across a warzone, but they have to find a way to convince both sides that the fighting needs to be curtailed because the invisible aliens represent a common threat that must be addressed—if something isn’t done soon, the “secret war” will destroy everything the real war is allegedly being fought over! Of course, the journey across the warzone can still include all the expected elements (if you ignore them completely, some of the players may feel justifiably cheated out of their fun), but a good Narrator vigilantly searches for “hooks” that can be used to make the ordinary episode extraordinary.

TO ERR IS INSPIRING

Here’s a quick one that has served the author well over the years: A comedy of errors! Or a drama of errors, or even a *horror* of errors . . . A lot of great stories are founded on mistakes, and this is a method of idea-generation that begins with the idea of somebody messing up. Like any other idea-generator, this technique works best when it’s followed up with one of the other methods (the Element Lists on pg. 45, for example) of fleshing an idea to completion.

Begin by dreaming up the blunderer. Is it a Starfleet officer? A ship's captain, even? An admiral? Or maybe a scientist . . . there's plenty of room for dangerous (and interesting) errors in the laboratories of the 23rd century. Is the error-maker one of the members of the ship's crew? A statesman on a distant planet? A Klingon, or Romulan, perhaps? Errors made by people with power and responsibility have greater potential consequences, and this exercise is all about exploring the outer limits of the possibility of error.

But don't limit yourself. Perhaps the blunderer is a small child, who wandered into a place where he shouldn't have access—or a well-meaning but insignificant clerk or minor bureaucrat. Minor errors can propagate in dangerous ways, and minor people can sometimes have access to things more important than they should. In an ongoing series, it's often interesting to make your blunderer an established and recurring NPC.

Once you've picked your blunderer, the "game" begins: What kind of blunder could this person make that would interest, endanger, or otherwise involve the Crew? It's a little like the old "six degrees" game, where you figure out how many friends of friends of acquaintances it takes to get from you to the Prime Minister of England: What repercussions could stretch from your chosen blunderer to the Crew?

For want of a shoe, the horse was lost, and then the whole battle. What this technique is really about is exploring *propagation*. On Orion, an ordinary peddler picks up a metallic case he mistakes for his own, but when he gets home, he finds that it contains, not costume jewelry for offworld tourists, but samples of an extremely rare drug. The next thing he knows, everybody from Federation agents to Andorian gangsters are pursuing him, and he doesn't know who to trust. Hoping to move interest away from himself, he slips the goods into the tote-bag of one of the Crew, whose ship is orbiting Orion for shore leave—and now everybody is involved, and a mystery is afoot . . .

The game of idea-generation from errors can be entertaining all by itself. Play it for a few hours, and it can also provide the Narrator with a wealth of concepts he can explore in his series.



SHAMELESS BORROWING

Obviously, you can create good episodes of the *Star Trek Roleplaying Game* by taking inspiration from (or even directly adapting) plots from episodes of *Star Trek* itself, or from later *Star Trek* spin-offs, or even from other science fiction television, comic books, film, or literature. Sometimes, when you're stuck for ideas and need a plot quickly, this can be a lifesaver—any *Star Trek* episode guide becomes a book of handy adventure seeds.

But, as long as we're "borrowing" a plot, the same amount of effort can be spent to borrow from a completely *different* source: good *Star Trek* stories can be built on the framework supplied by anything from Shakespeare to a modern crime novel, from Norse mythology to Broadway musicals. The possibilities are limited only by your own creativity and ingenuity.

By adapting stories from non-science-fiction sources, the clever Narrator can not only "file off the serial numbers" in a way that will make the source of the plot invisible, he can also open himself up to new kinds of stories that will keep his series fresh and interesting. And again, when you're stuck for ideas and need something *now*, borrowing is sometimes the only way out that doesn't involve permanent hair loss.

The first step, of course, is to pick a source. Just about any story (true or fictional) will do, as long as you can cast the Crew in a metaphorical role equal to that of the story's existing protagonist(s). Then, it's just a matter of re-casting the rest of the story around that focal point, the Crew (and their vessel).

We'll start with a story that just about anybody might be familiar with: The Wizard of Oz. Since it's a fantasy story already, it's halfway there for us, and will make an easy adaption. The basic sequence goes something like this:

Dorothy, the heroine, is swept along with her Kansas farmhouse by a tornado, and dropped off in Oz, a faraway land. The house drops on an evil witch, killing her. Dorothy is welcomed to Oz by the people the witch had been tormenting, and they give her the witch's ruby slippers for luck.

Dorothy sets out on a journey to find the Wizard, who can help her return home to Kansas. Along the way, she meets a group of friends native to Oz, and is tormented by the sister of the dead witch, who wants the ruby slippers.

The witch finally gains the upper hand, capturing Dorothy and her friends and bringing them to her castle. Dorothy won't give up the slippers, though, and defeats the witch, melting her with water. With the witch defeated, she can journey to the Emerald City safely, to hook up with the Wizard and use the slippers to get home.

Of course, in the end, it turns out to have been a dream—but that kind of thing justifiably irritates players, so we opt to skip that part in our summary on the grounds that it won't be of any use. The same will probably go for the witch looking like the mean old lady back in Kansas,



and the tin-man and company looking like Dorothy's back-home friends. We want to turn this into a more serious episode, and that kind of reference to the source will be a little too obvious. What we have left, neatly divided into three potential Acts, is a story that can easily be made into *Star Trek* by re-casting each significant part: Dorothy and the farmhouse becomes the Crew and their starship. Oz becomes a distant sector of space (or even an alternate dimension, like the universe in "Mirror, Mirror"). The tornado is easily replaced by any kind of deep-space energy storm or weird phenomenon we care to cook up. With that as a beginning, we come up with something like this:

Our heroes, the Crew, are swept along with their starship by a rare solar storm they've been assigned to observe, and deposited in an uncharted sector of deep space. The ship emerges near an alien vessel, ripping open her hull and exposing part of it to space. The alien vessel attacks, using previously unknown energy weapons, and the Crew are forced to defend themselves. The enemy ship is defeated, and the inhabitants of a nearby planet contact the Crew to thank them for freeing them from the tyranny of the aliens, and ask that they take the alien ship's strange power core away from their world and find a place where it can be used for good.

The Crew sets out on a journey to a nearby star, where they've been told that there is an academy of scientists that can help them undo the effects of the storm and create a way back to Federation space. Along the way, they encounter friendly vessels forming a space-convoy to the same world, and defend against attacks from the same alien race whom they fought in the beginning—apparently the power core they have in the cargo hold is experimental and valuable, and the tyrannical bad-guy aliens want it back, badly.

The aliens trick the convoy, luring them via a distress beacon to a deserted planet where an armada awaits—but they reveal a vital weakness,

and the Crew are able to defeat them utterly. With the enemy out of the way, the Crew can journey to meet with the scientists, who use the experimental power core to open a rift back to Federation space.

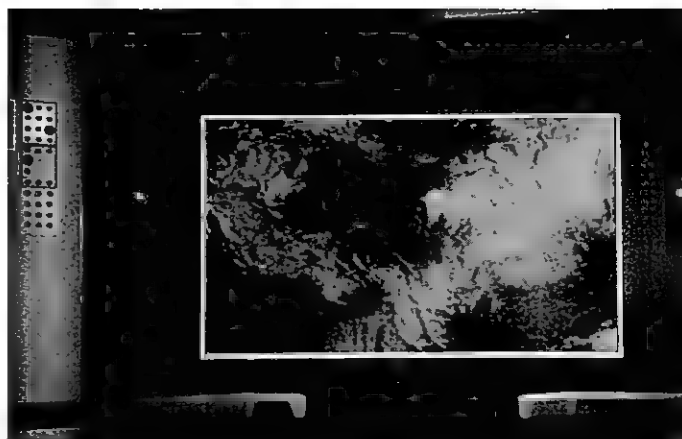
There's no place like home. Narrate it with a straight face, and unless your players have Oz on the brain, they're likely not to even notice where the story came from, even though they'll probably make "we're not in Kansas, anymore" jokes in play. Savor the irony. It's one of the great joys of being the Narrator.

Of course, it may happen that your players—being the clever, creative types that they no doubt are, will catch your source in play. "Hey! This thing is one big fusion-powered ruby slipper!" If that happens, be gracious about it—it's one of the risks of borrowing so shamelessly. One good method of avoiding this is to combine your sources—drawing from two entirely unrelated stories, combining the best elements of both. Another way of doing it is to apply liberal doses of the other episode-writing methods described in this book, remolding your new creation until it's truly an original.

And of course, sometimes it's fun when they finally "get the reference," preferably once it's all over, so it doesn't disrupt play too much. If you've based an episode on *The White Company*, or *Waiting for Godot*, or something equally respectable, letting the secret slip makes you look good, anyway. If, on the other hand, the most gut-wrenching, immersive, and dramatic episode of your series was secretly based on an episode of *Gilligan's Island*, you're pretty much honor-bound to take that one to your grave.

ELEMENT LISTS

This technique is another one that works best when you have at least the beginnings of an idea generated. In fact, it works best if you've already sketched out a rudimentary plot, but feel that it lacks color and depth—but it can also be used to turn a simple idea into something much more like a complete episode. Even when you're running a pre-written story like the one included in this book, jotting down a handful of element lists is often a



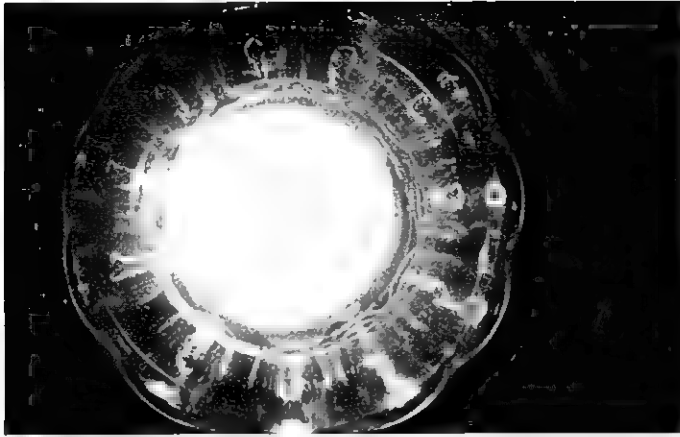
good preparatory measure to help keep your game organized and running smoothly.

The idea is simple: Make lists of important episode elements (interesting locations, key NPCs, conflicts, choices, atmospheric background-noise, etc), and keep the lists handy during play (using index cards to keep your lists easily at hand works well). If a scene begins to lag, or if a change of pace will add spice to the action, grab one of your lists and drop in an element.

By keeping the lists at the ready, you'll provide yourself with far more "material" than a typical episode will actually need—but it's far better to have too much than too little, and unused elements can always be recycled in future episodes or scenarios. Furthermore, by making yourself think in terms of these key elements, you can organize an idea into an episode, and make sure the episode has the variety it requires.

Usually, three of each item is sufficient. Some appropriate lists:

Three Choices: As we've noted before, the essence of gameplay is meaningful choice. Do your best to note three distinct choices that the Crew (or a member of the Crew) will have to make in the course of the episode. The choices should all have reasonable and very real consequences in the story, and the best kinds of choices have more than one "right" path. In *Star Trek*, choices are typically challenges to things like duty and personal belief. The most difficult (and most dramatic) choices are those where somebody will suffer either way—and the Crew must decide who.



Three Conflicts: A story isn't dramatic without conflict! Conflict can be anything from a starship battle or other combat to a tense verbal battle of wits, or even a race. A good conflict has two (or more) factions, each bringing their own resources to bear to defeat the other. Sometimes, it's an everybody-wins or everybody-loses scenario—trying to talk a desperate man out of doing something dangerous out of despair, for example. The best episodes feature a mix of physical and intellectual conflicts, and all participants in a conflict should have clearly defined motives.

Three Flavor Details: See the section on page 12 about "Background Noise." Keep a list of three "non-plot" scenes that can be inserted at need. These should be deliberately geared to establish mood: If the episode is meant to be frightening, these elements should foster fear. If the episode is meant to be humorous, these elements should be funny. If the episode takes place on a world with a distinctive culture, these elements should highlight details of that culture to help make the experience memorable.

Three Locales: Don't bother listing the starship bridge or the transporter room—make a list of three interesting and different "sets" that your scenes can take place in. While there's nothing wrong with meeting the ambassador in his office before he beams aboard, it's more interesting to meet him in the crystal gardens of the planetary capital, where he likes to have tea and rest. Against a backdrop of multicolored crystals and

soothing waterfalls, the meeting takes on more of a "sense of place."

Three NPCs: Sometimes, if an episode takes place in a deserted ancient city, or a derelict spaceship, or a hostile, lifeless world, it's easy for the Narrator to forget how vital the Supporting Cast are to making an episode well-rounded. And while occasional "people-free" episodes can provide a genuinely creepy departure from the norm, a good general rule is that if you can't list three interesting NPCs that might appear in the story, the story needs work. If the primary locale for the episode is genuinely deserted, it's often a good opportunity to introduce a few of the Crew's own shipmates—while the story should always center on the Crew, it should never feel as though they're the only interesting people on an entire starship.

Of course, there are plenty of other things worth listing, if you have the prep-time: names (for improvised NPCs), rumors (in a conspiratorial series), strokes of good or bad luck, aliens (if you want to highlight the species-diversity of the *Star Trek* universe), scientific elements (to foster a strong science-fiction flavor), minor subplots and threads (for complex stories or long series), and more. A few episodes' worth of experience will show which lists are worth making and maintaining, and which don't fit your personal style.

You may also want to try applying one or more *themes* to your lists. If you want romance and romantic subplots to play a big part of your series, for example, you could make a point of making one item on *each* list suitable to that theme: A relationship-oriented choice, a personal conflict, an NPC that might be a potential romantic interest for a member of the Crew, a romantic locale, and so on. Even a tiny sprinkling of this kind of deliberate theming can strongly flavor an episode.

Series Considerations

All the episodes of your game together form your *series* (what is often called a "campaign" in other RPGs). You don't have to have a series to play *Star Trek*—you can



enjoy the game as an occasional one- or two-night adventure, with no connection at all between an episode you run now and one you run a month from now. But, if each episode you run tends to involve the same Crew, then your episodes begin to describe the ongoing adventures of those same characters. Then, you've got a series, and the potential for one of the greatest pleasures that RPGs have to offer.

EPISODIC SERIES

Many *Star Trek* RPG series are "episodic," the simplest kind of series. Each episode is a standalone story, which just happens to be another chapter in the lives of the Crew. This kind of series requires no special considerations apart from keeping things consistent—if you establish in one episode that Starbase 5 has been destroyed by an antimatter explosion, the Crew probably shouldn't be allowed to send a subspace distress call to Starbase 5 three episodes later (at least not without establishing that it's been rebuilt).

The episodic series has many advantages. Since each episode stands alone, it makes it easy for "irregular" members of the Crew to take part. If the player with the Tellarite security officer is only available to game one night out of the month due to his family and work schedule, there's no trouble having him simply be "below decks," and not involved with the plot, on episodes where he can't appear. Since recurring NPCs and other elements occur in this kind of series by happy accident more than anything else, it also can reduce the workload of the Narrator.

The only real downside to an episodic series is small, but can be significant. It's often harder to come up with fresh stories for episodes when you don't have threaded subplots or series arcs (see below) to draw upon. In this way, the demands on the Narrator's imagination can be increased as greatly as his workload is otherwise decreased! It's just plain easier to come up with stories that build on each other, at least as far as the basic plot goes.

THREADED SUBPLOTS

Any series can benefit from the presence of threaded subplots. In particular, though, an otherwise "episodic" series can gain a real sense of depth and continuity by allowing a few discrete subplots to thread their way into the game.

Subplots are best if they encompass a finite duration—dragging threads out forever is always more irritating than entertaining, unless the Narrator's goal is to create a deliberate "soap opera" atmosphere. Just because a plot runs in the background through several episodes doesn't mean that it follows different rules than other plots: It simply works better with a beginning, middle, and a satisfying conclusion.

Subplots can also "pop into the limelight" to surprise the characters. If you have a romantic subplot running between a ship's captain and a non-Federation citizen (an NPC), it can increase the drama of an episode if the captain's romantic partner reveals her politics by taking sides against the captain at an important juncture. And just because they differ on that point doesn't necessarily end the subplot, either—it can enrich it, and because it had an episode to shine, it will hold everybody's interest in the future.

Subplots can often be built as the series matures; they needn't be planned and plotted in advance. That's one of the beautiful things about them—since they're played out piecemeal, they can be built carefully, and be the most memorable parts of a long-running series. Often, when the Narrator is stuck for ideas, he can build an entire episode by picking up these threads and weaving them together in new ways.

ARCING PLOTLINES

Story arcs are the Big Brother of threaded subplots. Like the smaller threads, a story arc builds over several episodes, developing to its own climax. Unlike the small threads, though, a story arc is the meat and substance of the episodes themselves, and not a “subplot” at all. A long-running rivalry between two ships (one Federation and the other Klingon), the exploration of a new sector and its cultures, an interstellar war These are all potential themes for story arcs. Story arcs are plots that are too big and too rich to cram into a single episode, so they are told over two or more (sometimes a lot more). Each episode in the string that comprises the arc should be entertaining on its own, with its own conclusions and triumphs and memorable elements.

Arcs needn't be run in consecutive episodes. “Non-Arc” stories can be placed between “Arc” stories, to provide variety. In “Non-Arc” episodes, the story arc may sometimes appear as a subplot.

EPICS

An epic is a very different animal from other kinds of series. The concept of the “episode” is much less important. Rather than doing something that resembles a TV show, you're doing something that resembles a very focused *novel*. Episodes are really “chapters” of a kind, because the series exists to tell a single story. Unlike a story arc, which can take up large chunks of a series without dominating it, an epic is a single tale, plotted (at least in the rough outlines) from the beginning, with very few (if any) plots that have nothing to do with the central theme.

Epics can be very satisfying, but they are inevitably the result of lots of hard work and evaporated spare time on the part of the Narrator. Approach the design of an epic exactly as you do that of an episode—divide it into acts, define your themes, and so on. The difference is one of scale. Like a story arc, an epic is a tale too large for a single episode. Unlike a story arc, it's so big that other stories within it would distract from its impact—there will be enough going on *in* the epic to keep the Crew busy!

SEASONS

If you want to play with all of these series styles, you can deliberately divide your series into “seasons” of a sort. Starting off with a single season of episodic play as a prelude to a full-blown epic can be very satisfying, since the Crew will become well-defined prior to their role in the Big Story. Of course, from season to season, characters sometimes change, too. A break between “seasons” can be an excellent chance for the players to make up entirely new characters, if they, too are in the mood for variety.



"If a man is not rising upward to be an angel, depend upon it, he is sinking downward to be a devil.—He cannot stop at the beast."

— Coleridge

"Stopping at the Beast" is a *Star Trek Roleplaying Game* episode designed for a single evening of play, although seeds and options are provided for Narrators who might enjoy expanding on some of the ideas it contains. This episode assumes that the Crew commands a

Stopping at the Beast

Starfleet vessel that might reasonably be assigned to patrol and explore the space along the far reaches of the Klingon Neutral Zone (meaning that this adventure takes place some time after 2267, when the Neutral Zone was established as part of the Organian Peace Treaty). Events described in the episode assume that it takes place in 2269.

This episode is designed to be ideal for novice Narrators, introducing more Narrators' advice, and illustrating many of the concepts touched on earlier in this book.

ATTENTION PLAYERS: Don't read any further! This section contains information about an episode that your Narrator may choose to run during your series; knowing too much about it could spoil your enjoyment.



SUMMARY OF ACT ONE

In this Act, the Crew are attacked by an automated battle-drone bearing Klingon markings, in a sector of space where no Klingon ships should be. Other, inoperative drones drifting in space lead the ship to a nearby star, orbited by a single Class M world. In orbit around the mystery planet is, not a Klingon ship, but the dead wreckage of the *U.S.S. Karl Braun*, a Federation science vessel believed lost, floating amid energy-charged metallic debris. A signal from the planet's surface indicates that survivors of the *Karl Braun* may still live, and a shuttle journey to the surface is necessary to seek them out. The Crew finds two survivors, Dr. Ian Deacon and his daughter Angela, defending themselves against Klingon warriors.

NARRATOR'S SUMMARY

Twenty years ago, a Federation science ship was lost, deep on the fringes of known space, at the distant outward edge of what is now the Klingon Neutral Zone. While on a mission of exploration in these distant reaches of space, the Crew discovers the wreck of the lost ship, in a stable orbit around an uncharted world. Exploration leads to the survivors, led by Dr. Ian Deacon, living planetside in an ancient ruin. Deacon and his two fellow survivors are fighting for their lives against the menace of a band of Klingons who are also stranded on the planet, and the Crew (themselves stranded by the curious energies surrounding the world) is asked for aid. As the story unfolds, deceptions are revealed, and the Crew must ally with the Klingons to survive the evil plans of Doctor Deacon.

Act One: Survivors!

THE BATTLE-PROBES

This episode's "teaser" is an encounter with a small cluster of armed Klingon probes in deep space. Out of

nowhere, the Klingon devices seem to appear, and the ship is struck by disruptor fire . . . In a sector of space two weeks from the Neutral Zone!

Set the scene: The Crew are on a mission of exploration in the outer reaches of the Alpha Quadrant, just at the edge of both Federation and Klingon space, along the edge of the Neutral Zone. They are now at rest in deep space while the ship performs detailed sensor-sweeps of their surroundings. Remote sensors have catalogued the stars here, but the Crew is, they believe, on the first Federation ship to explore these systems directly. After a few weeks of routine star mapping, the mission has been peaceful, interesting mostly to the scientists on board, and free of incident. Out of nowhere, a flash of green light fills the bridge viewscreen, and the ship lurches, struck by a Klingon disruptor . . .

Refer to the statistics in the sidebar. The cloak-probe drops the cloak, and four of the nine defense probes



THE PURPOSE OF THIS SCENE

This scene is designed to wake the players up, to give them an immediate taste of danger and mystery, and to hook them into the story. The probes are faulty prototypes, and shouldn't be much of a threat. Despite being of little military use to the Klingons, though, the probes serve a few handy functions for the Narrator:

The probes establish the presence of Klingons nearby, in a place where Klingons shouldn't be. This should put the Crew on their guard, and get them worried, since they are suddenly faced with the possibility of an invisible enemy.

The surviving, inoperative probes are a handy way to point the Crew in the direction of the real adventure, since their programming reveals that they were launched from one of the nearby star-systems. If the Narrator needs to feed the Crew any additional information later in the story, he can always have a Supporting Cast technician "discover something new" in the programming of the probes.

An action scene—even a simple one like this—is a good way to start any episode; it immediately engages the attention of the players.

attack immediately. The remaining four are functionally inoperative—they fly in formation with the attacking probes (fanning out to surround the Crew's vessel), but they are useless.

The probes are meant to scare the players, not cripple their ship—they should be easily destroyed. If destroying the probes is too easy, you may opt to have one or more self-destruct, to get the deck heaving under the Crew's feet a little.

As the brief combat progresses, feed the Crew a new tidbit of information each round: The Klingon markings, the sudden energy-flare as the cloak-probe melts itself into slag, the lack of disruptor-fire from half of the probes. Build the sense of mystery early—the players should get a distinct impression that there is a lot “wrong with this picture.” Why Klingon probes, here? Where is the ship that launched them?

In the aftermath of the battle, it should occur to the players that beaming one of the inoperative probes aboard (or even the fused wreck of the cloak-probe) would be a good idea. If they don't seem to be hitting on the idea themselves, a subordinate can suggest it passively to them: “Sir, the remaining probes are dead in space. Should I have Ensign Lavok beam one aboard to be examined?”

Sitting on the transporter platform amid thin wisps of obligatory dry-ice vapor, the probe is only slightly taller than the average human, and no wider. The pale green metal and markings make it out, clearly, as a Klingon design.

The Crew should have to make a few skill-rolls to successfully open the device and decode its programming (Material Engineering (Metallurgical) at Difficulty 7; Systems Engineering (Weapons) or Computer (Programming) at Difficulty 9). If the Narrator is feeling especially threatening, the explosive core can still be active, requiring a kind of “bomb-squad” approach to even getting the panels open. Ultimately, though, the Crew should learn that the probe-cluster was launched over a year ago, and drifted idle before activating at the first long-range sight of the Crew's ship. The programming clearly reveals that the origin launching point of the probes is a nearby star—noted in the Federation catalogues as Gamma Naturalis.



KLINGON DEFENSE PROBE

Designed and tested circa 2268 as a result of the technological exchange between the Klingons and Romulans, the *Kakkor*-class defense probe is a simple robot probe armed with a disruptor and an explosive device. They are deployed in clusters of 9 probes—8 gun-probes, and a single *cloaking probe*. The cloaking probe is a small cloak-generator and power source, capable of throwing a cloakscreen around the other 8 probes when they are in very close proximity (about 3 meters at most). The probes can thus drift invisibly until the need to strike arises. Each of the nine probes share the following statistics in common:

Size: 1 (2 meters long)
Resistance: 0
Crew/Passengers: 0
Computers: 1
Structural Points: 2

The combative probes also carry two weapons systems. The first is a disruptor capable of delivering 16 points of damage (Range 5/10,000/50,000/100,000; Accuracy 4/5/7/10) in a universal arc of fire. Power requirement isn't an issue—the probe can fire the weapon at need (once per combat round) and travel at need, and has no other functions to allocate power to. The second “weapon system” is an explosive device. If more than half of its fellow probes are destroyed, the probe self-destructs, doing 30 points of damage to any target within 5 kilometers, and 10 points of damage to any target within 10. The probes have an effective skill of 5 for the purpose of firing their weapons.

The cloak-probe's exact contents remain conjecture, but they certainly contain a specialized cloaking device, excellent long-range and lateral sensors, a powerful computer, and a self-destruct mechanism of their own. As soon as they drop cloak and the cluster deploys to attack, the cloak probe immediately destroys itself, melting into inert slag.

THE GAMMA NATURALIS SYSTEM

Gamma Naturalis itself is a simple red dwarf star, an ordinary sun like billions of others in the night sky. Orbiting it are five planets, each of them barren balls of rock or ice, except one: Gamma Naturalis II, the second world out from the star. Gamma Naturalis II is an M-Class planet, earthlike, with oceans and continents and, obviously even from a distance, native life—although whether its life-forms are more evolved than leafy plants cannot be ascertained at a glance. In fact, from the Crew's vessel, it can't be ascertained at all, because the sensor readings make no sense . . .

Gamma Naturalis II has two items of interest orbiting it. The first, and most immediately obvious, is the dead wreck of a starship, the *U.S.S. Karl Braun*. The *Karl Braun*, a small (three-deck) science vessel, was launched more than 20 years ago, and lost to the stars, like so many other vessels exploring deep space. Ship library records reveal that the *Braun's* presence here is certainly possible—this world is along the general path the *Braun* was due to take, albeit much further from the core of Federation space than might be expected. The ship is an empty wreck, circling the world below in a stable synchronous orbit, suggesting that the crew had launched some kind of expedition to the world below. The ship is cold and dark (power systems running at minimum), but externally unscathed, and entirely devoid of corpses. If the crew of the *Karl Braun* is dead, then their bodies are presumably planetside. Of course, it should occur to the Crew that, given that Gamma Naturalis II is an M-Class planet, there may be survivors,



THE PURPOSE OF THIS SCENE

This scene should be kept as brief as possible. The main purpose of this scene is revelation: to deepen the mysteries introduced in the teaser. If the Crew are tempted to linger too long exploring the wreckage of the *U.S.S. Karl Braun*, try to tempt them away with interesting tidbits about the planet below—the curious energies being emitted, the possibility of new life, the possibility of surviving members of the *Karl Braun*, in need of rescue. As quickly as possible, the information to be had here should be gained, so that you can move on to the action of Scene Three.

perhaps stranded below, unable to return to their ship. The *Karl Braun* has a shuttle bay that was once (according to library records) equipped with two shuttles; both are missing. Examination of the ship's warp drive (Propulsion Engineering (Warp Drive) at Difficulty 7) will show that it is severely damaged, but that the damage obviously came from an internal accident, not from an attack. A quick skill roll (Difficulty 6) for any Engineer-type will reveal that the ship in its current state could never exceed Warp Factor 3.

The second "item" in orbit around Gamma Naturalis II isn't a single solid object—it is a halo, a faint cloud of superfine metallic and plastic debris, charged with strange radiations. To the naked eye, it pulses with a faint, eerie purple light. On the screen of the ship's sensor arrays, it appears as a violent chaos of multicolored fireworks. The halo is thickest around the planet's equator, and thinnest over the poles, but even at its thinnest point it is two kilometers thick. The particulate matter that makes up the cloud is dust so fine that most of it would be entirely invisible to the naked eye, and thinly distributed, but the charge of strange energies is constant and pervasive.

Narrator Take Note: The Crew will not be immediately aware of it, but the dust-cloud is all that remains of a Klingon destroyer—the ship that launched the probes encountered in Scene One—destroyed by an ancient weapon found in the ruins on the planet below! The dust-cloud plays havoc with all sensors in the area—anything about the world below that can't be made out visually, can't

be made out at all. Even attempts to sensor-sweep the Karl Braun are difficult and time-consuming (Difficulty 10).


Communications, however, can detect something . . . A faint, steady distress beacon, Federation standard code for 20 years ago, emanating from the surface of the planet. The source can be triangulated (with difficulty, due to the energized cloud — detection is Shipboard Systems (Communications) Difficulty 6; triangulation takes one hour at Difficulty 8) to the tip of a peninsula on one of the world's smaller continents . . . In an area that long-range visual sensors seems to indicate is a city! The broadcast is repetitive, clearly automated. Those who activated it might be long dead, but they might not be.

Clearly, an expedition to the planet's surface is called for, but any attempts to use the transporters will be disastrous failures—the beam simply can't punch through the interference of the dust-cloud. An atmospheric entry with shuttlecraft will be required.

KLINGONS!

This scene begins when the Crew takes a shuttle to the surface of Gamma Naturalis II. For the sake of the flow of the episode and everybody's enjoyment of it, it's important that the entire Crew go at the same time (they can take multiple shuttles, if they have some reason to, as long as they all depart for the surface at the same time). This shouldn't require too much sneaky coercion: The planet's surface is clearly where the next layer of the mystery lies, and likely the heart of the action, too—the Crew will, in all likelihood, be eager to shuttle down. If any of the Crew seem to be consider the option of staying on board, don't hesitate to have NPC crewmen point out how valuable their particular expertise is likely to be to the landing party!

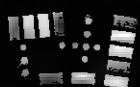
The descent, at first, is not difficult. Apart from the purplish glow, the dust-cloud isn't even visible to the naked eye, much less a physical hazard to navigation. As the shuttle descends through the cloud, the color of the light shifts to deep red, then orange, then to bright yellow before vanishing as the shuttle emerges beneath it, and shortly thereafter meets the upper atmosphere of Gamma Naturalis II.



THE PURPOSE OF THIS SCENE

- Scene Three is where the adventure kicks into the next gear (and the next Act), and has three distinct functions:
 - It strands the Crew and cripples their equipment. The Crew, duty-bound to seek out possible surviving Federation citizens, must take a shuttle through the energy-charged dust cloud. Doing so has bizarre effects on their equipment—and flight instruments! Forced to crash-land with a "scrambled" navicomputer, the Crew are stranded on the planet. They can't be beamed up, and additional shuttle flights from their ship would be pointless. Even their personal gear begins showing unpredictable glitches.
 - It introduces the conflict between Klageeth, a stranded Klingon leading a small band of warriors, and Dr. Deacon, a self-stranded Human responsible for the deaths of hundreds as part of his quest for "forced" evolution and immortality. What it doesn't reveal is that Deacon, not Klageeth, is the episode's villain. Quite the opposite: This scene should make Deacon look like an innocent victim, hounded by the Mean Old Klingons.
 - It provides an opportunity for action. The Crew, fresh from a rough landing, are called upon to rescue Dr. Deacon and his daughter from a small group of Klingons.

At this point, the trouble begins. The shuttle's navigational instruments begin to show subtle signs of trouble, and then go completely haywire! They are useless, and the shuttle pilot must make a Difficult (13) roll against his Vehicle Operation (Shuttlecraft) skill to avoid a crash-landing that physically cripples the shuttle. If the roll is made, then a harrowing approach rattles the occupants and lands the shuttle in a grassy valley not too far from the source of the distress signal. If the roll is failed, the landing is in the same valley, is a fair bit more harrowing and physically dangerous. The crashed shuttle itself suffers 3d6 structural points of ship damage, and the occupants take 1+1d6 damage each (triple that to any characters who were moving around the shuttle and not in their safety restraints!).



DEACON'S VERSION OF THE STORY

The role of this scene is mostly expository: It's all about getting information from the NPCs to the Crew (even if it's mostly false information). Note that while Drs. Deacon and Borley are deliberately lying about many things, Angela sincerely believes almost all of it, since Deacon and Borley have lied to her, as well, since she was a child.

The Fate of the *U.S.S. Karl Braun*: The ship suffered damage to its navigation instruments and warp capability after an explosion in engineering did irreparable damage to the computer. Lost in deep space, the crew and scientists aboard the vessel (which included Deacon and his wife, Ellen, a noted Archaeologist), agreed to seek out a world of their own, to settle on and make new lives. They hoped that Starfleet might one day find them, but didn't really have high hopes, since they knew they had wandered far from where the Federation exploration missions would reach for many years. They found this world, established an orbit over a place near this city, and moved in.

The other *Karl Braun* Survivors: Things went well for the first couple of months. The planet provided for the basic needs of the survivors, and the scientists set to studying the alien ruins. Everyone was kept occupied and conflicts were few. However, while they didn't at first realize it, the strange background radiation present in the local rocks caused a debilitatingly rapid form of bone cancer—and only Borley's work investigating the medical technologies of the planet managed to uncover a device that provided a treatment. It was too late, however, to save most of the survivors. Only a handful made it through, and now only the three of them are left. Originally, five had survived, but two of the remaining party have been killed by the Klingons.

The *Karl Braun* Shuttlecraft: One of them has been dismantled and is used around the Deacon "household"—to generate power, as spare parts, panels of metal used as work tables, and so on. The other was damaged by a storm, and left high in the hills. The Klingons, Deacon says, took it and use it for power-generation. "Mostly to recharge their blasted disruptors," he'll add.

Angela: Angela was born here, before her mother was killed by the advanced stages of the bone cancer. Her mother died when Angela was two years old, one of the last of the survivors. Angela, now nineteen, has only dim memories of the *Karl Braun* crew.

The Klingons: The Klingon warship *Vree-Lak* arrived about a year ago. The Klingons were exploring here, and using these remote sectors of space as testing-grounds for weapons systems. It was a violation of the treaty, and they knew it, but since the Federation had done little exploration in this corner of space, they didn't care. The Klingons made an expedition to the surface to search the ruins for technologies that might be useful as weapons, and were dangers to Deacon and company from the very first. The Klingon leader, Klageth, apparently had a falling out with his first officer, who betrayed him and took over the *Vree-Lak*, leaving Klageth and his loyal subcommanders stranded here to torment Deacon and company. Recently, Klageth managed to exploit an opening in the protective shield around the city when Deacon's party was gathering food. Klageth killed two men, and stole a valuable power-crystal that makes one of the machines here in the city operable. The machine could perform many functions, mostly medical, including the treatments necessary to stave off the dangers of the planet's radiation. Without that crystal, and those treatments, Borley explains, all three of them will die of the cancer-like disease within a year. The Crew, too, he points out, are now in danger of being similarly contaminated.

The Energized Cloud: The cloud is an experimental Klingon weapon, the Doctor explains. The *Vree-Lak* released it into orbit as part of their mission to test out weapons on remote worlds. After the cloud was in place, Deacon lost all hope of his distress signal being heard by surveying starships, since the signal, he knew, could hardly survive past the edge of the Gamma Naturalis system, now.

Some parts of Deacon's story are true: The *Karl Braun*'s engineering accident happened as described, as did the initial settlement of the planet. The Klingons had indeed been in the area testing weapons—the defense probe clusters, not sensor-scrambling metallic clouds. When they meet Lieutenant Lochard in Scene Three, they will learn more of the truth.

Allow the Crew time to dust themselves off, tend to their wounds, and get their bearings. Communication with their ship is still possible—occasionally. The dust cloud interferes sporadically, causing sudden periods of silence or impenetrable static whenever the Narrator feels like it, but communication becomes clear occasionally, allowing the Crew to obtain occasional reports from the ship above, request library data, and so on. Personal equipment is now highly “buggy.” Tricorder readings make sense only half the time; personal computers behave strangely and fail suddenly. Weapons, at least, seem unaffected—the Crew’s phasers work just fine.

The valley the Crew has landed in is beautiful. The planet is very earthlike, with wildflowers, feathery grasses, and distant trees resembling conifers. Rocky hills are visible just to the north. It is late in the morning, and the Crew has plenty of daylight to work with. Their tricorders operate sufficiently to let them determine that their location is approximately seven kilometers southwest of the source of the distress signal, which they can detect clearly.

Let them explore a little bit, and probably begin hiking toward their goal. As they approach the rocky hills, they hear a distant scream for help, undoubtedly a woman’s voice!

The planet is almost entirely uninhabited. Once the home of an advanced civilization, all that’s left now is ruins, and two groups of stranded starfarers. The first group consists of three humans: Dr. Ian Deacon, his assistant, Borley, and his daughter, Angela (that’s the one currently screaming). The second group consists of seven Klingons, led by Klageth (the once-captain of the imperial destroyer, Vree-Lak, which is currently playing the part of



THE PURPOSE OF THIS SCENE

This scene, like the second scene of Act One, is another bridging-sequence, designed to move the story from one direction to another, in this case providing the major “plot twist” of the episode—the presence of Sean Lochard.

This scene is an excellent opportunity to let the players have fun, and to set a tense and dangerous mood. It should feel like a midnight raid on a military camp, regardless of what time of day the Crew opts to do it in. It should give the players a dose of action and the tense excitement of breaking into the camp—play up the atmosphere for all it’s worth before Lochard’s appearance changes the basic nature of the story.

our bothersome metallic cloud). Both groups noted the descent of the Crew’s shuttlecraft, and members of each (three Klingons, and Dr. Deacon and his daughter) moved to investigate. They encountered each other in the process; hence the screams.

The Crew has the advantage in this encounter. As they approach the source of the scream, they see the backs of the three Klingons (each should be treated as typical Klingon warriors in terms of statistics; use the stats given on pg. 203 of the *Star Trek Roleplaying Game* core rule-book), who have disruptors trained on a rocky outcropping perhaps 30 meters ahead and 5 meters above their position. Behind the rocks, movement can be made out—Dr. Deacon and Angela. The latter is panicking a bit, lobbing rocks and insults at the Klingons, who are laughing without apparent mirth.

Clearly, a rescue is called for. The Crew have the advantage of surprise, and may use it as they wish, either to put a special plan into action or simply to attract the attention of the Klingons.

The Klingons do their best to make this into a fight, although they happily exchange some haughty threats if inspired to do so. Genuinely shocked to see Starfleet officers, Klageth simply assumes that Dr. Deacon has managed to obtain new allies, and immediately treat the

Crew as enemies. Note that, Organian treaty notwithstanding, these Klingons have no more compunctions about killing Starfleet officers than they did about violating the bounds of the Neutral Zone.

The terrain is rocky and treacherous, riddled with ravines filled with deadly, sharp rocks. The first Klingon stunned by a phaser falls to his doom—and the others make a tactical retreat. Most likely, the Crew satisfies themselves with chasing them off, anyway. At least one of the three Klingons should escape alive, if at all possible. That way, the Crew can later recognize the escaped Klingon as Klageth. If all three Klingons are killed and/or captured, then Klageth simply was not part of this group. If the Crew do manage to capture one, he is of no help, cursing Dr. Deacon, humanity, the Federation, and everything worthwhile in the galaxy while struggling his hardest to get to his blade in order to kill everyone in sight.

The scene comes to its conclusion when the Crew finally meet Dr. Deacon and Angela, waiting behind the rocks to be rescued. Dr. Deacon is gaunt and pale, and seems overjoyed to finally see Federation officers again after so many years. “Finally, my dear!” he shouts to his daughter. “Finally, we are rescued! These men are of the Federation, which I’ve told you about since you were but a baby!” He welcomes the Crew back to his home. “Come, gentleman, allow me to show you what hospitality I can. The Klingons will surely return with greater numbers; we must move quickly!” Angela, radiant and shown initially with a fog lens, stares in quiet fascination at her uniformed rescuers.

SUMMARY OF ACT TWO

In the second act, the Crew is welcomed in the home of Dr. Deacon, where they are lied to. Seeking to use the Crew to win a power crystal stolen by the Klingons, Deacon claims that the crystal is necessary for medical treatments. After fighting to gain entrance to the Klingon encampment, the Crew discover that Lochard is still alive, living in uneasy truce with the Klingons, and that all the survivors of both the *Karl Braun* and the Klingon warship were killed by Dr. Deacon’s experiments.

COMMUNICATIONS

Throughout this episode, the Crew’s starship is likely to plan an important role, and be the Narrator’s most valuable tool for keeping the action moving. Whenever the Crew seem stuck, or confused, or need something confirmed, have their shipmates help out. Since it’s entirely up to you when the communicators work properly, this works entirely in favor of the episode.

For instance, if the players guess about the truth nature of the metallic cloud early on, it might be fun to have the ship’s sensors work well enough to confirm their suspicions (it’ll impress Lochard and Klageth, too). Just because the “default” episode outline assumes that they won’t figure it out doesn’t mean you shouldn’t let them feel good about themselves if they do! The same goes for many other aspects of the story.

Act Two: Door to Door

REVELATIONS OVER SUPPER

Dr. Deacon and Angela lead the Crew back to their home (stopping by the crashed shuttle, if the Crew wish, to gather any belongings). After a short trek through the hills, the Crew is greeted with the spectacular sight of a small, ruined alien city, surrounded by an obvious shimmer. “The ancient aliens who built this place,” the Doctor explains, “created this shield to protect from the harsh winter weather we sometimes get here. I’ve been studying them, you see. Most of their technology still works! It’s the find of a lifetime for a scientist, but a terrible thing to be trapped with one’s find! At any rate, the shield protects us from the Klingons, too. Nobody can penetrate the barrier without being let in.” So saying, he begins waving as they approach the barrier. On the other side, a thin, younger man waves back, and makes a curious motion with his right hand. As he does so, the barrier splits open, a large doorway sufficient to let the Crew into the city proper.



EXPANDING THIS ADVENTURE

"Stopping at the Beast" is designed for a single evening of fairly straightforward adventure, but there are plenty of points in the episode that can be expanded upon to create a richer, more involving story. A few sample points that could be expanded:

The Teaser: The setup assumes that the Crew are on or near the bridge. Instead, the Narrator could establish that the ship is in the midst of a detailed sensor survey, and ask "Where are each of you?" Since, as the episode begins, no heavy duties are required of any of them, they may well be relaxing or working in any part of their vessel. When the disruptor bolt hits, one or more of them could have difficulty reaching the bridge, if a turbolift or vital part of the ship is hit.

The Trek to the Cave: This scene is deliberately sketchy, a freeform time for the Crew to show off with a foregone conclusion—meeting Lieutenant Lochard. If the Narrator is in the mood to make Gamma Naturalis II itself more of a "character" in the episode, this is a prime time to have the Crew encounter the local flora, fauna, or weird phenomena—maybe even relics of the lost alien culture. The trip from Deacon's home in the ruined city to the Klingon camp can be stretched several kilometers, if the Narrator has a few interesting things to place along that trail!

Lochard and Klageth: Lochard's sudden arrival will almost certainly stop the Crew in their tracks, but it doesn't necessarily have to do the same to Klageth and his band! If you think a little more action and chaos would be good for the blood, have Klageth dismiss Lochard's suggestion that the new Starfleet officers aren't necessarily allied with Deacon. Klageth will order the Crew killed, and the mess will have to be sorted out, somehow—possibly by just slapping the Klingons around sufficiently until they shut up and listen.

Energy Klingon: When and if Dr. Deacon "transforms" in the climax, he might start beckoning everybody in the room to "Join me! We will be as gods!" Klageth might like the sound of that, and this could add a new level of challenge to the final scenes. Klageth leaps into the light, eager to be a super-Klingon, and wreaks havoc for a while spouting energy-blasts from his eyes and generally bringing the roof down even faster. Ultimately, he'll get sucked into the crystal just before it explodes, just like Deacon.

Improvise the wonders of the city at need—spires of deep red stone, amphitheaters, fountains, abstract statuary. There are no carved images of the aliens themselves, and few clues as to their shape, but their size, at least, was comparable to humans—archways and doorways are only slightly larger than human-standard.

The man who opened the barrier is Borley, the last of Deacon's party. He wears a shirt that is a remnant of a Starfleet uniform, twenty years out of date, but clearly indicating that he is a physician who had held the rank of lieutenant. Quick with greetings, he also seems overjoyed at the sight of signs of the UFP.

Deacon and his companions live in what might once have been a large manor of some kind, carved entirely of stone. The Crew will be invited to supper, and around the supper table, over steaming plates of fresh vegetables, the Crew no doubt eagerly question Deacon and compa-

ny, and they eagerly answer. Let the dialogue flow naturally for as long as the interest of the players is engaged. See the sidebar for what Ian Deacon, Borley and Angela have to say about the many topics they may be questioned on.

Ultimately, the dialogue boils down to a request for aid. Two doctors and a young woman are no match for Klageth's band of killers, Dr. Deacon explains, and without that crystal, he and Angela and Borley will die—and the Crew, too, unless their ship can devise a way to get them all off the planet, soon. Deacon asks the Crew to invade the Klingon camp, and retrieve the crystal from Klageth.

THE KLINGON CAVE

The Klingon encampment is in a natural cave that has been expanded with the careful use of hand-held energy

weapons. The cave opening is fairly small and constantly guarded by one or two Klingons, while another is typically on patrol a few hundred meters away, on a higher peak that offers a good view of all natural approaches to the cave. "All natural approaches" are, unless the Crew is capable of flight, limited to a narrow path winding around one side of the hill.

Improvise details at need, and let the players have fun coming up with a plan of approach. Play out all the sneaking, guard-disabling, and tricky tactics that they might come up with. Ultimately, the Crew makes it deep into the cave, where they meet up with Klageth, the rest of his Klingons, and with a human—Lieutenant Sean Lochard of the *U.S.S. Karl Braun*, allied with Klageth, and not in the least bit dead. It's best to have him step dramatically out of the shadows of the cave, just as Klageth and the Crew come face-to-face. While the Crew may be itching for battle, Klageth and company hold back, on Lochard's advice. Lochard knows that if Starfleet knows what Deacon is up to, they won't be helping Deacon at all . . . and that if Starfleet is helping Deacon, it's because they don't know what's going on. He intends to tell them.

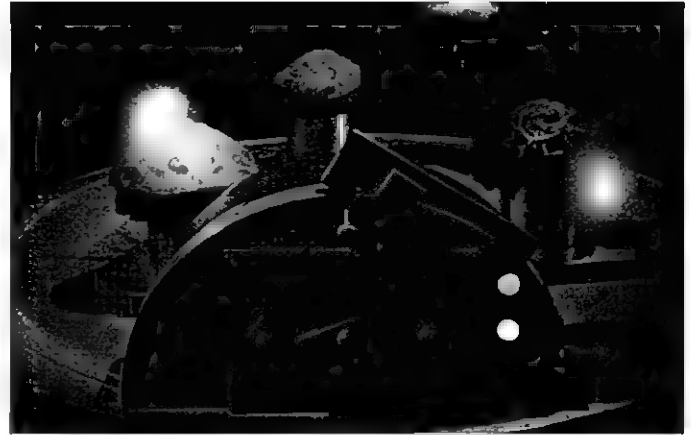
Depending on the temperament of the Crew and the behavior of the Klingons they stun or capture (hopefully!) to gain entry, there may still be a scene of combat in the cave. But Lochard's presence (and uniform) should be all that's needed to throw ice water on the fight, and turn it into a parley.

LOCHARD

The Klingons, obviously, aren't happy. Lochard told them that the Starfleet officers that they met would be along sooner or later, and here they are, breaking in. Klageth stands stock-still and seethes while Lochard speaks:

"I can only assume you're here at the request of professor Deacon," he'll begin. "My name is Lochard, helmsman aboard the *U.S.S. Karl Braun*. Deacon is a killer, a madman."

Lochard, clearly, has a lot of explaining to do. This is his story (dispense it all at once, or in tasty chunks of dialogue, depending on how your players approach things):



"Twenty years ago, we of the the *Karl Braun* came to this planet, seeking a place to live after we lost hope of returning to Federation space. In the first two years, almost all of us were killed by what we believed was a form of cancer caused by the planet—but we were wrong. Doctor Deacon's wife had found something in the ruins—a machine with many capabilities, including the forced evolution of material life into pure energy. Dr. Deacon became obsessed with the idea of advancing all of us to "higher" forms of life, and, along with Doctor Borley, experimented on us, telling us that he was treating us for cancer. One by one, he killed the survivors. Most were never even buried—they were disintegrated, forced into an energy-state they were never meant to live in.

"I never found out the truth until last year. For two decades, I lived with Deacon, Borley, Angela and Caswell, trying to make a life, here. Only the doctors knew what had really happened. They let us go on thinking we'd lost our friends to a disease. All that while, Deacon was still experimenting, but this time more carefully, giving us phony "cancer treatments" to keep up his lie.

"A year ago, the Klingons arrived, to plunder the planet for military technology [Klageth bristles and growls at this, but says nothing]. We were all scared; the Klingons had us outgunned and helpless, and we didn't know what they'd do. They came into our home and found the equipment that the doctors had been using, and wanted to know if they could be used as weapons. Doctor Deacon showed them . . ."

Klageth speaks up at this point. "While we were returning to our camp, having given the Doctor until nightfall to

reveal to us what secrets he may have discovered, the Doctor activated his machine in an entirely new way, and utterly destroyed my ship and all aboard her. At his whim, my warship was disintegrated, reduced to dust that even now encircles this world." Klageth's rage is apparent, and his finger strokes gently along the edge of the blade at his side.

And Lochard completes the story: "From that point on, Caswell and I questioned the two doctors, and found out the truth about the machine, and his experiments. We were horrified. Destroying the Klingon vessel had drained the power source from his machine for a while, so Caswell and I stole it. Borley shot Caswell, but I escaped, and made a pact of truce with Klageth. That was months ago, now, and I don't know what Deacon has been up to since, and I don't know what he told Angela about Caswell and I . . ."

When Lochard explains about the power source, he shows it to the Crew—a purple crystal, about the size of a football, glowing with inner light. The light is identical to that in the metallic cloud surrounding the planet.

It may take the Crew a few minutes to work out where all this leaves them. Nobody has "bone cancer," and the Klingons weren't abandoned by politics—they are the last survivors of the destruction of their ship. They and Lochard have the power-crystal that makes Dr. Deacon's machine work, and Dr. Deacon (who obviously believed Lochard was dead) still thinks that the Crew are trying to get the crystal back from the Klingons. The Crew, in turn, are still stranded—the energy-charged cloud makes further shuttle flights a needless risk, and using the transporter remains out of the question. Angela, at least, is an innocent in need of rescue . . .

Or not. Two Klingons enter the cave, carrying a wriggling Angela Deacon by her arms. Her dress is torn and her face is artfully smudged with dirt from sneaking around outside the cave. "We found this one trying to eavesdrop," says the taller of the Klingons.

Lochard is stunned to see Angela, and Angela seems terrified. She followed the Crew because she wanted to warn them. She expected them to defeat the Klingons as handily as before, and assumed that they'd get the crystal. She wanted to tell them not to give it to her father.

"I've known; I've known for over a year. I've known since even before the Klingons came. Tonight, Father is already preparing his foul machine for the return of the crystal. He thinks he can finally evolve beyond flesh, to force himself to become pure energy. And he thinks he can do the same to all of us! I've been spying on him . . ."

And as she reveals this, the ground beneath them begins to shake, and a crack opens up in the cave wall, releasing scalding steam. One Klingon screams, trying to leap away, and falls down, badly injured. At that moment, the Crew's communicators squeal for attention: Ship's sensors have detected massive volcanic activity at nearly every point on the planet's surface: It's tearing itself apart!

Act Three: Pride Goeth

WELCOME TO THE MACHINE

The enigmatic native aliens of Gamma Naturalis II built "the machine" when most of the races of the Federation were in their infancy, for reasons perhaps unfathomable. Drs. Deacon and Borley, in their arrogance, believed that they understood the process of "forced" evolution sufficiently to advance their victims, their fellow crewmembers from the *Karl Braun*. And now, Dr. Deacon, in his rage at discovering his daughter is missing, has activated the machine in a fit of paranoia. The machine, without the crystal to supply it with steady power and moderation (it's

SUMMARY OF ACT THREE

The Crew must confront Drs. Deacon & Borley in the cavernous ancient laboratories beneath the ruins of the alien city. The ancient machine, activated in a fit of rage by Deacon, is destroying the planet itself, without the purple crystal to moderate it and provide it with power. Armed with the power crystal and side-by-side with the Klingons, Lochard and Deacon's daughter, they must save everyone on the planet before the world is destroyed in a volcanic catadysm.



really much more than a power source), and without its millenia-dead operators to guide it safely through the process, is destroying Gamma Naturalis II.

When the Crew arrives back at the edge of the city, the shimmer of the force-screen protecting it is erratic, leaving large gaps open for a second at a time, unpredictably spaced and shaped. After a few Moderate (7) Dodge or Athletics (Jumping) tests to keep the dice rolling, they are inside, and can hurry onward (guided by Angela and Lt. Lochard, if need be) to the underground laboratory that houses the machine. Within the lab, both doctors have been working frantically to control it, and Deacon has aligned a series of bright-white beams on a reflective metallic platform. Both Deacon and Borley are armed with phasers.

The Crew must try to reason with or incapacitate the doctors, while at the same time preventing the Klingons, Angela, and Lochard from doing anything stupid or putting themselves in danger. In general, unless the scene seems to need it, Angela and Lochard are likely to behave, but the Klingons are likely to want to tear the doctors to shreds using blades, their bare hands, and possibly their teeth. A strong leader can keep them in line, though (with a well-roleplayed Command (Combat Leadership) at Difficulty 9, for instance).

Clearly, the machine needs the power crystal, but just as clearly, Drs. Deacon and Borley should be away from the controls of the machine when it gets there. The large socket meant to hold the crystal is visibly obvious. The following broad avenues for the ensuing dialogue and/or physical struggle exist:

The power crystal is placed in the socket with one of the doctors still near the controls: If this happens, either Borley or Deacon immediately aims the white beams at Deacon, triggering “Deacon’s Transformation” (see below).

The power crystal is placed in the socket with both doctors kept away from the controls: If either doctor is conscious, one or both of them dives for the white rays, likely succeeding. Again, see “Deacon’s Transformation,” below. Deacon is preferable for the transformation, but Borley will serve in a pinch.

The power crystal is placed in the socket with both doctors unconscious or dead: Neither doctor is transformed, but the machine still sucks the energy-beings trapped in planetary orbit back down into itself (see below).

The power crystal is not placed in the socket at all: Discourage this at all costs. Angela, Lochard, even the Klingons are there to try to convince the Crew to do the right thing if for some reason they are hesitant. “Pathetic Starfleet scum! Has your life of weakness enfeebled your minds, as well? The planet is breaking apart!!!”

Well, in truth, the planet goes right on breaking apart no matter what happens. But the power crystal does make one dramatic difference—it brings back the power, in the form of several dozen beings of pure energy—the crew of the *U.S.S. Karl Braun*. Deacon, although he never realized it, had successfully forced most of his crewmates into a stable energy-state—but he had no idea what happened to them afterwards.

Absorbed into the crystal matrix for years, awaiting release, they made the machine more powerful with their tragic imprisonment. When Deacon unleashed the power of the machine on the Klingon destroyer, he released the stored entities into a new prison—the orbital dust-cloud, and caused a feedback loop that shut down the machine, leaving him (and Lochard) to believe that the “battery” had been drained and needed recharging.

DEACON'S TRANSFORMATION

If Dr. Deacon (or alternately, Borley) manages to get in the path of the white beams, he successfully forcibly evolves into a being of pure energy. He hangs around briefly for a villainous gloat about now being a superior species and so on, before being sucked into the crystal, which then explodes in a shower of purple sparks. Neither the machine nor the crystal was designed to handle the sudden reflux of the energies in orbit, combined with the the machine being operated without it. The machine attempts to re-direct the energies to stop the volcanic destruction of the world . . . and there isn't nearly enough for that to happen. Gamma Naturalis II is doomed.

THE FALL OF THE HOUSE OF DEACON

With the strange energies circling the planet sucked back downwards and dispersed, the Crew's ship is once again capable of full sensor-scans of the planet, and safe use of the transporter. However, those same curious energies fill the walls of the underground laboratory, and if the Crew want safely out, they need to get topside, and very quickly.

The race up the stairway as huge chunks of red stone rain down, crushing ancient devices in showers of sparks, is best abstracted into a series of descriptions, demands on the players—"A huge rock slams down, sealing the passage out. What do you do???"—and simple die-rolls. Any NPCs that might provide a brief tragic death-scene can buy the farm easily at this point, if the Narrator sees fit. Once everyone is clear, the communications channel to the ship in orbit is crystal-clear, and all the survivors of the episode can be safely beamed aboard.

LOOSE ENDS AND RESOLUTIONS

Once the warm hum of ship's engines and the pneumatic hiss of opening doorways safely surrounds the Crew, the ship must immediately leave orbit, as the planet is well and truly fragmenting in a massive, slow-motion explosion. On the viewscreens, the once-pleasant valleys

of Gamma Naturalis II are replaced by heavy fields of black, broken by glowing orange cracks, exposing the molten core of the world.

This leaves the Crew with, potentially, one 20-year lost veteran of Starfleet (Lochard), who is eager to return to service, one 19-year old young woman (Angela), eager to learn about the galaxy beyond Gamma Naturalis II, a small group of Klingons, and one unconscious doctor (or two, if neither was transformed). Any of which can be glossed over in post-episode Narration, or kept around to form the basis for future subplots and arcs.

DR. IAN DEACON

ATTRIBUTES

Fitness 2
Strength -1
Vitality +1
Coordination 2
Intellect 4
Perception -2
Presence 1
Psi 0

NOTABLE SKILLS

Persuasion 2
Computer (Research) 3 (5)
Energy Weapon (Phaser) 1 (2)
...and many science skills.

DR. JAMES BORLEY

ATTRIBUTES

Fitness 2
Coordination 2
Reaction +1
Intellect 3
Logic +1
Presence 2
Psi 0

NOTABLE SKILLS

Computer (Research) 2 (3)
Energy Weapon (Phaser) 1 (2)
...and many science skills.

LT. SEAN LOCHARD

ATTRIBUTES

Fitness 3
 Vitality +2
Coordination 2
Intellect 2
Presence 3
 Willpower +2
Psi 0

NOTABLE SKILLS

Computer (Research) 1 (3)
Energy Weapon (Phaser) 3 (4)
First Aid 1
Dodge 2
Personal Equipment 1
...and many professional (shipboard) skills relating to his former duties.

KLAGETH

ATTRIBUTES

Fitness 3
 Vitality +2
 Strength +1
Coordination 3
 Dexterity +1
Intellect 2
 Logic -1
Presence 3
 Empathy -2
Psi 0

NOTABLE SKILLS

Command (Ship Command) 3 (5)
Energy Weapon (Disruptor) 2 (3)
Unarmed Combat (Dirty Fighting) 3 (5)
Intimidation (Bluster) 2 (4)
Dodge 2
Primitive Weaponry (*D'k Tagh* and *Mek'leth*) 3 (4)
...and a variety of other skills suitable to his position.

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